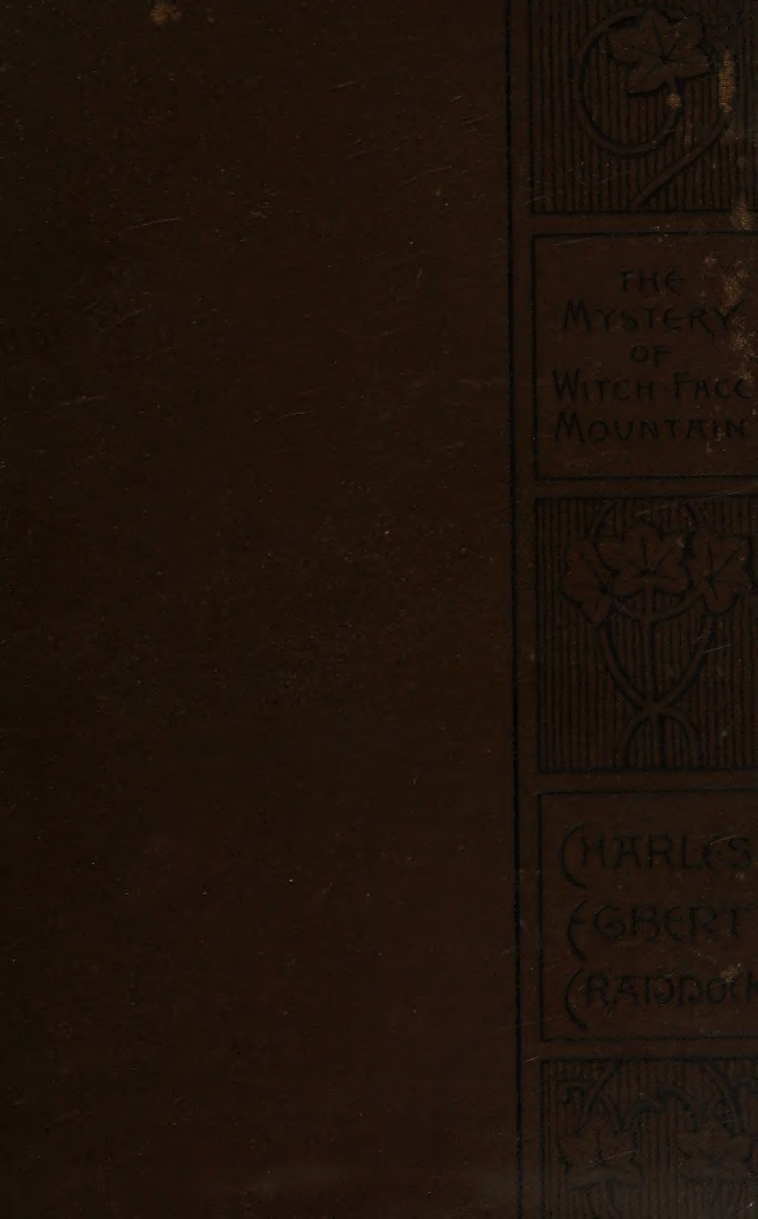
THE
MYSTERY
OF
WITCH FACE
MOUNTAIN
CHARLES
EGBERT
CRADDOCK

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HOUGHTON, MIFFLIN AND COMPANY,
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THE MYSTERY OF WITCH-FACE MOUNTAIN

AND OTHER STORIES

BY

CHARLES EGBERT CRADDOCK

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
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THE MYSTERY OF WITCH-FACE MOUNTAIN.

I.

THE beetling crags that hang here and there above the gorge hold in their rugged rock sculpture no facial similitudes, no suggestions. The jagged outlines of shelving bluffs delineate no gigantic profile against the sky beyond. One might seek far and near, and scan the vast slope with alert and expectant gaze, and view naught of the semblance that from time immemorial has given the mountain its name. Yet the imagination needs but scant aid when suddenly the elusive simulacrum is revealed to the eye. In a certain slant of the diurnal light, even on bright nights at the full of the moon, sometimes in the uncanny electric flicker smitten from a storm-cloud, a gigantic peaked sinister face is limned on the bare, sandy slope, so definite, with such fixity of lineament, that one is amazed that the perception of it came no earlier, and is startled when it disappears.

Disappearing as completely as a fancy, few there are who have ever seen it who have not

climbed from the herder's trail across the narrow wayside stream and up the rugged mountain slopes to the spot where it became visible. There disappointment awaits the explorer. One finds a bare and sterile space, from which the hardy chickweed can scarcely gain the sustenance for timorous sproutings; a few outcropping rocks; a series of transverse gullies here and there, washed down to deep indentations; above the whole a stretch of burnt, broken timber that goes by the name of "fire-scald," and is a relic of the fury of the fire which was "set out" in the woods with the mission to burn only the leaves and undergrowth, and which, in its undisciplined strength, transcended its instructions, as it were, and destroyed great trees. And this is all. But once more, at a coigne of vantage on the opposite side of the gorge, and the experience can be utilized in differentiating the elements that go to make up the weird presentment of a human countenance. It is the fire-scald that suggests the great peaked brown hood; the oblong sandy stretch forms the pallid face; the ledges outline the nose and chin and brow; the eyes look out from the deep indentations where the slope is washed by the currents of the winter rains; and here and there the gullies draw heavy lines and wrinkles. And when the wind is fresh and the clouds scud

before it, in the motion of their shadows the face will seem to mow at the observer, until the belief comes very readily that it is the exact counterpart of a witch's face.

Always the likeness is pointed out and insisted on by the denizens of Witch-Face Mountain, as if they had had long and intimate acquaintance with that sort of unhallowed gentry, and were especially qualified to pronounce upon the resemblance.

"Ain't it jes' like 'em, now? Ain't it the very moral of a witch?" Constant Hite demanded, one gusty day, when the shadows were a-flicker in the sun, and the face seemed animated by the malice of mockery or mirth, as he pointed it out to his companion with a sort of triumph in its splenetic contortions.

He was a big, bluff fellow, to whose pride all that befell him seemed to minister. He was proud of his length of limb, and his hundred and eighty pounds of weight, and yet his slim appearance. "Ye would n't believe it now, would ye?" he was wont to say when he stepped off the scales at the store of the hamlet down in the Cove. "It 's solid meat an' bone an' muscle, my boy. Keep on the friendly side of one hunderd an' eighty," with a challenging wink. He was proud of his bright brown eyes, and his dark hair and mustache, and smiling,

handsome face, and his popularity among the class that he was pleased to denominate "gal critters." He piqued himself upon his several endowments as a hardy woodsman, his endurance, his sylvan craft, his pluck, and his luck and his accurate aim. The buck — all gray and antlered, for it was August — that hung across the horse, behind the saddle, gave token of this keen exactitude in the tiny wound at the base of the ear, where the rifle-ball had entered to pierce the brain; it might seem to the inexpert that death had come rather from the gaping knife-stroke across the throat, which was, however, a mere matter of butcher-craft. He was proud of the good strong bay horse that he rode, which so easily carried double, and proud of his big boots and long spurs; and he scorned flimsy town clothes, and thought that good home-woven blue jeans was the gear in which a man who was a man should clothe himself withal. He glanced more than once at the different toggery of his companion, evidently a man of cities, whom he had chanced to meet by the wayside, and with whom he had journeyed more than a mile.

He had paused again and again to point out the "witch-face" to the stranger, who at first could not discern it at all, and then when it suddenly broke upon him could not be wiled

away from it. He dismounted, hitching his horse to a sapling, and up and down he patrolled the rocky mountain path to study the face at various angles; Constant Hite looking on the while with an important placid satisfaction, as if he had invented the illusion.

"Some folks, though, can't abide sech ez witches," he said, with a tolerant smile, as if he were able to defy their malevolence and make light of it. "Ye see that cabin on the spur over yander around the bend?" It looked very small and solitary from this height, and the rail fences about its scanty inclosures hardly reached the dignity of suggesting jackstraws. "Waal, the Hanways over thar hev a full view of the old witch enny time she will show up at all. Folks in the mountings 'low the day be onlucky when she appears on the slope thar. The old folks at Hanway's will talk 'bout it cornsider'ble ef ye set 'em goin'; they hev seen thar time, an' it rests 'em some ter tell 'bout'n the spites they hev hed that they lay ter the witch-face."

The ugly fascination of the witch-face had laid hold, too, on the stranger. Twice he had sought to photograph it, and Constant Hite had watched him with an air of lenient indulgence to folly as he pottered about, now adjusting his camera, now changing his place anew.

"And I believe I have got the whole amount of nothing at all," he said at last, looking up breathlessly at the mountaineer. Albeit the wind was fresh and the altitude great, the sun was hot on the unshaded red clay path, and the nimble gyrations of the would-be artist brought plentiful drops to his brow. He took off his straw hat, and mopped his forehead with his handkerchief, while he stared wistfully at the siren of his fancy, grimacing maliciously at him from the slope above. "If the confounded old woman would hold still, and not disappear so suddenly at the wrong minute, I 'd have had her charming physiognomy all correct. I believe I 've spoiled my plates, — that 's all." And once more he mopped his bedewed forehead.

He was a man of thirty-five, perhaps, of the type that will never look old or grow perceptibly gray. His hair was red and straight, and cut close to his head. He had a long mustache of the same sanguine tint. The sun had brought the blood near the surface of his thin skin, and he looked hot and red, and thoroughly exasperated. His brown eyes were disproportionately angry, considering the slight importance of his enterprise. He was evidently a man of keen, quick temper, easily aroused and nervous. His handsome, well-groomed horse was fractious, and difficult for so impatient a rider

to control. His equestrian outfit once more attracted the covert glance of Con Hite, whose experience and observation could duplicate no such attire. He was tall, somewhat heavily built, and altogether a sufficiently stalwart specimen of the genus "town man."

"I'll tell you what I'll do!" he exclaimed suddenly. "I'll sketch the whole scene!"

"Now you're shoutin'," said Con Hite capably, as if he had always advocated this method of solving the difficulty. His interlocutor could not for a moment have dreamed that he had never before seen a camera, had never heard of a photograph, had not the least idea of what the process of sketching might be which he so boldly approved; nay, the very phrase embodying his encouragement of the project was foreign to his vocabulary, — a bit of sophisticated slang which he had adopted from his companion's conversation, and readily assimilated.

"You stay just where you are!" cried the stranger, his enthusiasm rising to the occasion; "just that pose, — that pose precisely."

He ran swiftly across the path to remove the inefficient camera from the foreground, and in a moment was seated on a log by the wayside, his quick eye scanning the scene: the close file of the ranges about the horizon, one showing above

another, and one more faintly blue than another, for thus the distance was defined; then the amphitheatre of the Cove, the heavy bronze-green slopes of the mountains, all with ripple marks of clear chrome-green ruffling in the wake of the wind; in the middle distance the still depths of the valley below, with shadows all a-slumber and silent, and on the projecting spur the quiet, lonely little house, so slight a suggestion of the presence of man amidst the majestic dominance of nature; here, to the right, across the savage gorge, with its cliffs and with its currents in the deep trough, the nearest slope of the mountain, with the great gaunt bare space showing that face of ill omen, sibylline, sinister, definite indeed, — he wondered how his eyes were holden that he should not have discerned it at once; and in the immediate foreground the equestrian figure of the mountaineer, booted and spurred, the very "moral," as Hite would have called it, of an athlete, with his fine erect pose distinct against the hazy perspective, his expression of confident force, the details of his handsome features revealed by the brim of his wide black hat turned up in front.

"It 's a big subject, I know; I can't get it all in. I shall only suggest it. Just keep that pose, will you? Hold the horse still. 'Stand

the storm, it won't be long!'" the artist said, smiling with renewed satisfaction as his pencil, not all inapt, went briskly to work on the horizontal lines of the background.

But it was longer than he had thought, so still sat the contemplative mountaineer, so alluring were the details of the landscape. The enthusiasm of the amateur is always a more urgent motive power than the restrained and utilitarian industry of the professional.

Few sworn knights of the crayon would have sat sketching so long in that temperature as he did, with the sun blazing through his straw hat and his blood mustering under his thin skin; but he stopped at a point short of sunstroke, and it was with a tumultuous sense of success that he at last arose, and, with the sketch-book still open, walked across the road and laid it on the pommel of the mountaineer's saddle.

Constant Hite took it up suspiciously and looked at it askance. It is to be doubted if ever before he had seen a picture, unless perchance in the primary reading-book of his callow days at the public school, spasmodically opened at intervals at the "church house" in the Cove. He continued to gravely gaze at the sketch, held sideways and almost reversed, for some moments.

"Bless Gawd! hyar's Whitefoot's muzzle jes'

ez nat'ral — an' *Me* — waal, sir! don't *I* look proud!" he cried suddenly, with a note of such succulent vanity, so finely flavored a pride, that the stranger could but laugh at the zest of his triumph.

"Do you see the witch-face?" he demanded.

"Hesh! hesh!" cried the mountaineer hilariously. "Don't 'sturb me 'bout yer witch-face. Ef thar ain't the buck, — yes, toler'ble fat, — an' with all his horns! An' look at my boot, — actially the spur on it! An' my hat turned up;" he raised his flattered hand to the brim as if to verify its position.

"You did n't know you were so good looking, hey?" suggested the amused town man.

"My Lord, naw!" declared Hite, laughing at himself, yet laughing delightedly. "I dunno *how* the gals make out to do without me at all!"

The pleased artist laughed, too. "Well, hand it over," he said, as he reached out for the book. "We must be getting out of this sun. I 'm not used to it, you see."

He put his foot in the stirrup as he spoke, and as he swung himself into the saddle the mountaineer reluctantly closed and relinquished the book. "I 'd like ter see it agin, some time or other," he observed.

He remembered this wish afterward, and how

little he then imagined where and in what manner he was destined to see it again.

They rode on together into the dense woods, leaving the wind and the sunshine and the flying clouds fluctuating over the broad expanse of the mountains, and the witch-face silently mowing and grimacing at the world below, albeit seen by no human being except perchance some dweller at the little house on the spur, struck aghast by this unwelcome apparition evoked by the necromancy of the breeze and the sheen and the shadow, marking this as an unlucky day.

"That 's right smart o' a cur'osity, ain't it?" said Constant Hite complacently, as they jogged along. "When the last gover'mint survey fellers went through hyar, they war plumb smitten by the ole 'oman, an' spent cornsider'ble time a-stare-gazin' at her. They 'lowed they hed never seen the beat."

"What was the survey for?" asked the town man, with keen mundane interest.

Constant Hite was rarely at a loss. When other men were fain to come to a pause for the lack of information, the resources of his agile substitutions and speculations were made manifest. "They war jes' runnin' a few lines hyar an' thar," he said negligently. "They lef' some tall striped poles planted in the ground, red an' sich colors, ter mark the way; an' them

mounting folks over yander in the furderest coves, — they air powerful ahint the times, — they hed never hearn o' sech ez a survey, noway, an' the poles jes' 'peared ter them sprung up thar like Jonah's gourd in a single night, ez ef they kem from seed; an' the folks, they 'lowed 't war the sign o' a new war." He laughed lazily at the uninstructed terrors of the unsophisticated denizens of the "furderest coves." "They 'd gather around an' stare-gaze at the poles, an' wonder if they 'd hev ter fight the Rebs agin; them folks is mos 'ly Union." Then his interest in the subject quickening, "Them survey fellers, they ondertook, too, ter medjure the tallness o' some o' the mountings fur the gover'mint. Now what good is that goin' ter do the Nunited States?" he resumed grudgingly. "The mountings kin be medjured by the eye, — look a-yander." He pointed with the end of his whip at a section of the horizon, visible between the fringed and low-swaying boughs of hemlock and fir as the trail swept closer to the verge of the range, on which was softly painted, as on ivory and with an enameled lustre, two or three great azure domes, with here and there the high white clouds of a clear day nestling flakelike on the summits. "They air jes' all-fired high, an' that 's all. Do it make 'em seem enny taller ter say they air six

thousand or seben thousand feet? Man ain't used ter medjurin' by the thousand feet. When he gits ter the ground he goes by the pole. I dunno how high nor how long a thousand feet air. The gover'mint jes' want ter spend a leetle money, I reckon. It 'pears toler'ble weak-kneed in its mind, wunst in a while. But ef it wants ter fool money away, it 's mighty well able ter afford sech. It hev got a power o' ways a-comin' at money, — we all know that, we all know that."

He said this with a gloomy inflection and a downward look that might have implied a liability for taxes beyond his willingness to pay. But, barring the assessment on a small holding of mountain land, Constant Hite seemed in case to contribute naught to his country's exchequer.

"It needs all it can get, now," replied the stranger casually, but doubtless from a sophisticated knowledge, as behooved a reader of the journals of the day, of the condition of the treasury.

He could not account for the quick glance of alarm and enmity which the mountaineer cast upon him. It roused in him a certain constraint which he had not experienced earlier in their chance association. It caused him to remember that this was a lonely way and a wild

country. He was an alien to the temper and sentiment of the people. He felt suddenly that sense of distance in mind and spirit which is the true isolation of the foreigner, and which even an identity of tongue and kindred cannot annul. Looking keenly into the mountaineer's half-averted, angry, excited face, he could not for his life discern how its expression might comport with the tenor of the casual conversation which had elicited it. He did not even dimly surmise that his allusion to the finances of the government could be construed as a justification of the whiskey tax, generally esteemed in the mountains a measure of tyrannous oppression; that from his supposititious advocacy of it he had laid himself liable to the suspicion of being himself of the revenue force, — his mission here to spy out moonshiners; that his companion's mind was even now dwelling anew, and with a rueful difference, on that masterly drawing of himself in the stranger's sketch-book.

"But what do that prove, though?" Hite thought, a certain hope springing up with the joy of the very recollection of the simulacrum of the brilliant rural coxcomb adorning the page. "Jes' that me is *Me*. All he kin say 'bout me air that hyar I be goin' home from huntin' ter kerry my game. *That* ain't agin the law, surely."

The "revenuers," he argued, too, never rode alone, as did this man, and spies and informers were generally of the vicinage. The stranger was specially well mounted, and as his puzzled cogitation over the significant silence that had supervened between them became so marked as to strike Hite's attention, the mountaineer sought to nullify it by an allusion to the horse. "That feller puts down his feet like a kitten," he said admiringly. "I never seen nuthin' ez wears shoes so supple. Shows speed, I s'pose? Built fur it."

"Makes pretty fair time," responded the stranger without enthusiasm. The doubt, perplexity, and even suspicion which his companion's manner had evoked were not yet dissipated, and the allusion to the horse, and the glow of covetous admiration in Hite's face as his eyes dwelt upon the finely fashioned creature so deftly moving along, brought suddenly to his mind sundry exploits of a gang of horse-thieves about these coves and mountains, detailed in recent newspapers. These rumors had been esteemed by urban communities in general as merely sensational, and had attracted scant attention. Now, with their recurrence to his recollection, their verisimilitude was urged upon him. The horse he rode was a valuable animal, and moreover, here, ten or twenty miles from a

habitation, would prove a shrewd loss indeed. Nevertheless, it was impossible to shake off or evade his companion; the wilderness, with its jungle of dense rhododendron undergrowth on either side of the path, was impenetrable. There was no alternative practicable. He could only go on and hope for the best.

A second glance at the mountaineer's honest face served in some sort as reassurance as to the probity of his character. Gradually a vivid interest in the environment, which had earlier amazed and amused Constant Hite, began to be renewed. The stranger looked about to identify the growths of the forest with a keen, fresh enthusiasm, as if he were meeting old friends. Once, with a sudden flush and an intent eye, he flung the reins to the man whom he had half suspected of being a horse-thief ten minutes before, to hastily dismount and uproot a tiny wayside weed, which he breathlessly and triumphantly explained to the wondering mountaineer was a rare plant which he had never seen; he carefully bestowed it between the leaves of his sketch-book before he resumed the saddle, and Hite was moved to ask, "How d' ye know its durned comical name, ef ye never seen it afore? By Gosh! it 's got a name longer 'n its tap-root!"

The town man only laughed a trifle at this

commentary upon the botanical Latin nomenclature, and once more he was leaning from his saddle, peering down the aisles of the forest with a smiling, expectant interest, as if they held for him some enchantment of which duller mortals have no ken. A brown geode, picked up in the channel of a summer-dried stream, showed an interior of sparkling quartz crystal, when a blow had shattered it, which Hite had never suspected, often as he had seen the rugged spherical stones lying along the banks. All the rocks had a thought for the stranger, close to his heart and quick on his tongue, and as Hite, half skeptical, half beguiled, listened, his suspicion of the man as a "revenuer" began to fade.

"The revenuers ain't up ter no sech l'arnin' ez this," he said to himself, with a vicarious pride. "The man, though he never war in the mountings afore, knows ez much about 'em ez ef he hed bodaciously built 'em. Fairly smelt that thar cave over t' other side the ridge jes' now, I reckon; else how 'd he know 't war thar?"

A certain hollow reverberation beneath the horse's hoofs had caught his companion's quick ear. "Have you ever been in this cave hereabout?" he had asked, to Hite's delighted amazement at this brilliant feat of mental jugglery, as it seemed to him.

Even the ground, when the repetitious woods

held no new revelation of tree or flower, or hazy, flickering insect dandering through the yellow sunshine and the olive-tinted shadow and the vivid green foliage, the very ground had a word for him.

"This formation here," he said, leaning from his saddle to watch the path slipping along beneath his horse's hoofs, like the unwinding of coils of brown ribbon, "is like that witch-face slope that we saw awhile ago. It seems to occur at long intervals in patches. You see down that declivity how little grows, how barren."

The break in the density of the woods served to show the mountains, blue and purple and bronze, against the horizon; an argosy of white clouds under full sail; the Cove, shadowy, slumberous, so deep down below; and the oak leaves above their heads, all dark and sharply dentated against the blue.

Hite had suddenly drawn in his horse. An eager light was in his eye, a new idea in his mind. He felt himself on the verge of imminent discovery.

"Now," said he, lowering his voice mysteriously, and laying his hand on the bridle of the other's horse, — and so far had the allurements of science outstripped merely mundane considerations that the stranger's recent doubts and anxieties touching his animal were altogether for-

gotten, and he was conscious only of a responsive expectant interest, — "air thar ennything in that thar 'formation,' ez ye calls it ez could gin out fire?"

"No, certainly not," said the man of science, surprised, and marking the eager, insistent look in Hite's eyes. Both horses were at a standstill now. A jay-bird clanged out its wild woodsy cry from the dense shadows of a fern-brake far in the woods on the right, and they heard the muffled trickling of water, falling on mossy stones hard by, from a spring so slight as to be only a silver thread. The trees far below waved in the wind, and a faint dryadic sibilant singing sounded a measure or so, and grew fainter in the lulling of the breeze, and sunk to silence.

"Ennyhow," persisted Hite, "won't sech yearth gin out light somehows, — in some conditions sech ez ye talk 'bout?" he added vaguely.

"Spontaneously? Certainly not," the stranger replied, preserving his erect pose of inquiring and expectant attention.

"Why, then the mounting 's 'witched sure enough, — that 's all," said Hite desperately. He cast off his hold on the stranger's horse, caught up his reins anew, and made ready to fare onward forthwith.

"Does fire ever show there?" demanded his companion wonderingly.

"It 's a plumb meracle, it 's a plumb mystery," declared Constant Hite, as they went abreast into the dense shadow of the closing woods. "I asked ye this 'kase ez ye 'peared ter sense so much in rocks, an' weeds, an' birds, an' sile, what ain't revealed ter the mortal eye in gineral, ye mought be able ter gin some nateral reason fur that thar sile up thar round the old witch-face ter show fire or sech. But it 's beyond yer knowin' or the knowin' o' enny mortal, I reckon."

"How does the fire show?" persisted the man of science, with keen and attentive interest. "And who has seen it?"

"Stranger," said Hite, lowering his voice, "I hev viewed it, myself. But fust it war viewed by the Hanways, — them ez lives in that house on the spur what prongs out o' the range nigh opposite the slope o' the Witch-Face. One dark night, — thar war no moon, but thar warn't no storm, jes' a dull clouded black sky, ez late August weather will show whenst it be heavy an' sultry, — all of a suddenty, ez the Hanway fambly war settin' on the porch toler'ble late in the night, the air bein' close in the house, the darter, Narcissa by name, she calls out, 'Look! look! I see the witch-face!' An' they all start up an' stare over acrost the deep black gorge. An' thar, ez true ez life, war the witch-face glim-

merin' in the midst o' the black night, and agrinnin' at 'em an' a-mockin' at 'em, an' lighted up ez ef by fire."

"And did no one discover the origin of the fire?" asked the stranger.

"Thar war no fire!" Constant Hite paused impressively. Then he went on impulsively, full of his subject: "Ben Hanway kem over ter the still-house arter me, an' tergether we went ter examinate. But the bresh is powerful thick, an' the way is long, an' though we seen a flicker wunst or twict ez we-uns pushed through the deep woods, 't war daybreak 'fore we got thar, an' nare sign nor smell o' fire in all the woods could we find; nare scorch nor singe on the ground, not even a burnt stick or chunk ter tell the tale; everythin' ez airish an' cool an' jewy an' sweet ter the scent ez a summer mornin' is apt ter be."

"How often has this phenomenon occurred?" said the stranger coolly, but with a downcast, thoughtful eye and a pursed-up lip, as if he were less surprised than cogitating.

"Twict only, fur we hev kep' an eye on the old witch, Ben an' me. Ben wants a road opened out up hyar, stiddier jes' this herder's trail through the woods. Ben dunno how it mought strike folks ef they war ter know ez the witch-face hed been gin over ter sech cur'ous

ways all of a suddenty. They mought take it fur a sign agin the road, sech ez b'lieves in the witch-face givin' bad luck." After a pause, "Then *I* viewed it wunst, — wunst in the dead o' the night. I war goin' home from the still, an' I happened ter look up, an' I seen the witch-face, — the light jes' dyin' out, jes' fadin' out. She did n't hev time ter make more 'n two or three faces at me, an' then she war gone in the night. It 's a turr'ble-lookin' thing at night, stranger. So ye can't tell what makes it, — the sile, or what?"

He turned himself quite sideways as he spoke, one hand on the carcass of the deer behind the saddle, the other on his horse's neck, the better to face his interlocutor and absorb his scientific speculations. And in that moment an odd idea occurred to him, — nay, a conviction. He perceived that his companion knew and understood the origin of the illumination; and more, — that he would not divulge it.

"The soil? Assuredly not the soil," the stranger said mechanically. He was looking down, absorbed in thought, secret, mysterious, yet not devoid of a certain inexplicable suggestion of triumph; for a subtle cloaked elation, not unlike a half-smile, was on his face, although its intent, persistent expression intimated the following out of a careful train of ideas.

"Then what is it?" demanded Hite arrogantly, as if he claimed the right to know.

"I really could n't undertake to say," the stranger responded, his definite manner so conclusive an embargo on further inquiries that Hite felt rising anew all his former doubts of the man, and his fears and suspicions as to the errand that had brought him hither.

Could it be possible, he argued within himself, that to the agency of "revenuers" was due that mysterious glow, more brilliant than any ordinary fire, steady, suffusive, continuous, rising in the dark wilderness, in the deep midnight, to reveal that ominous face overlooking all the countryside, with subtle flickers of laughter running athwart its wonted contortions, more weird and sinister in this ghastly glare than by day? And what significance might attend these strange machinations? Revolving the idea, he presently shook his head in conclusive negation as he rode along. The approach of raiders was silent and noiseless and secret. Whatever the mystery might portend it was not thus that they would advertise their presence, promoting the escape of the objects of their search. Hite's open and candid mind could compass no adequate motive for concealment in all the ways of the world but the desire to evade the revenue law, or to practice the shifts and quirks necessary to the

capture of the wary and elusive moonshiner. Nevertheless, it was impossible, on either of these obvious bases, to account for the fact of something withheld in the stranger's manner, some secret exultant knowledge of the phenomenon which baffled the mountaineer's speculation. Hite, all unaware that in his impulsive speech he had disclosed the fact of his hazardous occupation, began to feel that, considering his liability to the Federal law for making brush whiskey, he had somewhat transcended the limit of his wonted hardihood in so long bearing this stranger company along the tangled ways of the herder's trail through the wilderness. "He *mought* be a revenuer arter all, an' know all about me. The rest o' the raiders mought be a-waitin' an' a-layin' fur me at enny turn," he reflected. "Leastwise he knows a deal more 'n he 's a-goin' ter tell."

He drew up his horse as they neared an open bluff where the beetling rocks jutted out like a promontory above the sea of foliage below. They might judge of the long curvature of the conformation of the range just here, for on the opposite height was visible at intervals the road they had traveled, winding in and out among the trees, ascending the mountain in serpentine coils; they beheld the Cove beneath from a new angle, and further yet the barren cherty slope

on which, despite the distance, the witch-face could still be discerned by eyes practiced in marking its lineaments, trained to trace the popular fantasy. The stranger caught sight of it at the same moment that Hite lifted his hand toward it.

"Thar it is!" Hite exclaimed, "fur all the Cove 's a shadder, an' fur all the wind 's a breath."

For clouds had thickened over the sky, and much of the world was gray beneath, and the scene had dulled in tint and spirit since last they had had some large outlook upon it. Only on the slopes toward the east did the sunshine rest, and in the midst of a sterile, barren slant it flickered on that semblance of ill omen.

"An onlucky day, stranger," Hite said slowly.

The man of science had drawn in his restive horse, and had turned with a keen, freshened interest toward the witch-face. It was with a look of smiling expectancy that he encountered the aspect of snarling mockery, half visible or half imaginary, of that grim human similitude. The mountaineer's brilliant dark eyes dwelt upon him curiously. However, if he had forborne from prudential motives from earlier asking the stranger's name and vocation, lest more than a casual inquisitiveness be thereby implied,

exciting suspicion, such queries were surely not in order at the moment of departure. For Hite had resolved on parting company. "An onlucky day," he reiterated, "an onlucky day. An' this be ez far ez we spen' it tergether. I turn off hyar."

So ever present with him was his spirituous conscience — it could hardly be called a bad conscience — that he half expected his companion to demur, and the posse of a deputy marshal to spring up from their ambush in the laurel about them. But the stranger, still with a flavor of preoccupation in his manner, only expressed a polite regret to say farewell so early, and genially offered to shake hands. As with difficulty he forced his horse close to the mountaineer's saddle, Hite looked at the animal with a touch of disparagement. "That thar beastis hev got cornsider'ble o' the devil in him; he 'll trick ye some day; ye better look out. Waal, far'well stranger, far'well."

The words had a regretful cadence. Whether because of the unwonted interest which the stranger had excited, or the reluctance to relinquish his curiosity, still ungratified, or the pain of parting to an impressionable nature, whose every emotion is acute, Hite hesitated when he had gone some twenty yards straight up the slope above, pushing his horse along a narrow

path through the jungle of the laurel, and turned in his saddle to call out again, "Far'well!"

The stranger, still at the point where Hite had quitted him, waved his hand and smiled. The jungle closed about the mountaineer, once more pushing on, and still the smiling eyes dwelt on the spot where he had disappeared. "Farewell, my transparent friend," the stranger said, with a half-laugh. "I hope the day is not unlucky enough to put a deputy marshal on your track." And with one more glance at the witch-face, he gathered the reins in his hand and rode on alone along the narrow tangled ways of the herder's trail.

Now and again, as the day wore on, Constant Hite was seized with a sense of something wanting, and he presently recognized the deficit as the expectation of the ill fortune which should befall the time, and which still failed to materialize. So strong upon him was the persuasion of evil chances rife in the air to-day that he set himself as definitely to thwart and baffle them as if rationally cognizant of their pursuit. He would not return to his wonted vocation at the distillery, but carried his venison home, where his father, a very old man, with still the fervors of an æsthetic pride, pointed out with approbation the evidence of a fair shot in the wound at the base of the buck's ear, and his

mother, active, wiry, practical-minded, noted the abundance of fat. "He fed hisself well whilst he war about it," she commented, "an' now he 'll feed us well. What diff'unce do it make whether Con's rifle-ball hit whar he aimed ter do or no, so he fetched him down somewhar?"

The afternoon passed peacefully away. It seemed strangely long. The sun, barring a veiled white glister in a clouded gray sky, betokening the solar focus, disappeared; the wind fell; the very cicadæ, so loud in the latter days of August, were dulled to long intervals of silence; in the distance, a tree-toad called and called, with plaintive iteration, for rain. "Ye 'll git it, bubby," Con addressed the creature, as he stood in the cornfield — a great yellow stretch — pulling fodder, and binding the long pliant blades into bundles. The clouds still thickened; the heat grew oppressive; the long rows of the corn were motionless, save the rustling of the blades as Hite tore them from the stalk. Even his mother's spinning-wheel, wont to briskly whir through the long afternoons, from the window of the little cabin on the rise, grew silent, and his father dozed beneath the gourd vines on the porch.

The sun went down at last, and the gray day imperceptibly merged into the gray dusk. Then came the lingering darkness, with a flicker of

fireflies and broad wan flares of heat lightning. Con woke once in the night to hear the rain on the roof. The wind was blaring near at hand. In its large, free measures, like some deliberate adagio, there was naught of menace; but when he slept again, and awoke to hear its voice anew, his heart was plunging with sudden fright. A human utterance was in its midst, — a human voice calling his name through the gusty night and the sibilant rush of the rain from the eaves. He listened for a moment at the roof-room window. He recognized with a certain relief the tones of the constable of the district. He opened the shutter.

A new day was near to breaking. He saw the wan sky above the periphery of dense dark woods about the clearing. A brown dusk obscured the familiar landmarks, but beneath a gnarled old apple-tree by the gate several men were dimly suggested, and another, more distinct, by the wood-pile, was in the act of gathering a handful of chips to throw at the shutter again. He desisted as he marked the face at the window.

"Kem down," he said gruffly, clearing his throat in embarrassment. "Kem down, Constant. No use roustin' out the old folks."

"What do you want?" asked Hite in a low voice, his heart seeming to stand still in suspense.

The constable hesitated. The cold rain dashed into Hite's face. The rail fences, in zigzag lines, were coming into view. A mist was floating white against the dark densities of the woods. He heard the water splashing from the eaves heavily into the gullies below, and then the constable once more raucously cleared his throat.

"Thar's a man," he drawled, "a stranger hyarabouts, killed yestiddy in the bridle-path. The cor'ner hev kem, an' he 'lows ye know suthin' 'bout'n it, Constant, — 'bout'n the killin' of him. I be sent ter fetch ye."

II.

A chimney, half of stone, half of clay and stick, stood starkly up in the gray rain and the swooping, shifting gray fog. It marked the site of a cabin burned long ago, and in such melancholy wise as it might it told of the home that had been. Now and again far-away lightning flashed on its fireless hearth; a vacant bird's-nest in a cranny duplicated the suggestions of desertion; the cold mist crept in and curled up out of the smokeless flue with a mockery of semblance. The fire that had wrought its devastating will in the black midnight in the deep wilderness, so far from rescue or succor, had swiftly burned out its quick fury, and was sated with

the humble household belongings. The barn, rickety, weather-beaten, deserted, and vacant, still remained, — of the fashion common to the region, with a loft above, and an open wagonway between the two compartments below, — and it was here that the inquest was held. It was near the scene of the tragedy, and occasionally a man would detach himself from the slow, dawdling, depressed-looking group of mountaineers who loitered in the open space beneath the loft, and traverse the scant distance down the bridle-path to gaze at the spot where the stranger's body had lain, whence it had been conveyed to the nearest shelter at hand, the old barn, where the coroner's jury were even now engaged in their deliberations. Sometimes, another, versed in all the current rumors, would follow to point out to the new-comer the details, show how the rain had washed the blood away, and fearfully mark the tokens of frantic clutches at the trees as the man had been torn from his horse. The animal had vanished utterly; even the prints of his hoofs were soon obliterated by the torrents and the ever-widening puddles. And thus had arisen the suspicion of ambush and foul play, and the implication of the mysterious gang of horse-thieves, whose rumored exploits seemed hardly so fabulous with the disappearance of the animal and the violent death of the rider in

evidence. The locality offered no other suggestion, and it was but a brief interval before the way would be retraced by the awe-stricken observer, noting with a deep interest impossible hitherto all the environment: the stark chimney of the vanished house, monumental in the weed-grown waste; the dripping forest; the roof of the barn, sleek and shining, and with rain pouring down the slant of its clapboards and splashing from its eaves; the groups of horses hitched to the scraggy apple-trees of the deserted homestead; and here and there the white canvas cover of an ox-wagon, with its yoke of steers standing with low-hung heads in the downpour. The pallid circling mists enveloped the world, and limited the outlook to a periphery of scant fifty paces; occasionally becoming tenuous, as if to suggest the dark looming of the mountain across the narrow valley, and the precipice close at hand behind the building, then once more intervening, white and dense of texture, forming a background which imparted a singular distinctness to the figures grouped in the open space of the barn beneath the shadowy loft.

The greater number of the gathering had been summoned hither by a sheer curiosity as coercive as a subpœna, but sundry of the group were witnesses, reluctant, anxious, with a vague terror of the law, and an ignorant sense of an

impending implication that set both craft and veracity at defiance. They held their heads down ponderingly, as they stood; perhaps rehearsing mentally the details of their meagre knowledge of the event, or perhaps canvassing the aspect of certain points which might impute to them blame or arouse suspicion, and endeavoring to compass shifty evasions, to transform or suppress them in their forthcoming testimony. At random, one might have differentiated the witnesses from the mass of the ordinary mountaineer type by the absorbed eye, or the meditative moving lip unconsciously forming unspoken words, or the fallen dismayed jaw as of the victim of circumstantial evidence. It was a strange chance, the death that had met this casual wayfarer at their very doors, and one might not know how the coroner would interpret it. His power to commit a suspect added to his terrors, and gave to the capable, astute official a mundane formidableness that overtopped the charnel-house flavor of his more habitual duties. He was visible through the unchinked logs of the little room where the inquest was in progress, barely spacious enough to contain the bier, the jury, and the witness under examination; and yet so great was the sound of the rain outside and the stir of the assemblage that little or naught was overheard without.

Now and again the waiting witnesses looked with doubt and curiosity and suspicion at a newcomer, with an obvious disposition to hope and believe that others knew more of the matter than they, and thus were more liable to accusation. Occasionally, a low-toned, husky query would be met by a curt rejoinder suggesting a cautious reticence and a rising enmity, blockading all investigation save the obligatory inquisition of a coroner's jury. An object of ever-recurrent scrutiny was a stranger in the vicinity, who had been subpœnaed also. The facial effect of culture and sophistication was illustrated in his inexpressive, controlled, masklike countenance. He was generally known as the "valley man with the lung complaint," who had built a cabin on the mountain during the summer, banished hither by the advice of his physician for the value to the lungs of the soft, healing air. He wore a brown derby hat, a fawn-colored suit, and a brown overcoat, with the collar upturned. He was blond and young, and so impassive was his sober, decorous aspect that the aptest detective could have discerned naught of significance as he stood, quite silent and composed, in the centre of the place where it was dry, exempt from the gusts of rain that the wind now and again flung in spray upon the outermost members of the group, one hand in the pocket of his

trousers, the other toying with a cigar which so far he held unlighted.

Of the two women present, one, seated upon the beam of a broken plough, refuse of the agricultural industry long ago collapsed here, was calmly smoking her pipe, — a wrinkled, unimpressed personality, who had seen many years, and whose manner might imply that all these chances of life and death came in the gross, and that existence was a medley at best. The other, a witness, was young. More than once the "valley man" cast a covert glance at her as, clad in a brown homespun dress, she leaned against the log wall, her face, which was very pale, half turned toward it, as if to hide the features already much obscured by the white sunbonnet drawn far over it. One arm was lifted, and her hand was passed between the unchinked logs in a convulsive grasp upon them. Her figure was tall and slender, and expressive in its rigid constraint; it was an attitude of despair, of repulsion, of fear. It might have implied grief, or remorse, or anxiety. Often the eyes of the prescient victims of circumstantial evidence rested dubiously upon her. To the great majority of men, the presence of women in affairs of business is an intrusive evil of times out of joint. Now, since matters of life and liberty were in the balance, the primitive

denizens of Witch-Face Mountain felt that the admission of Narcissa Hanway's testimony to consideration and credibility evinced an essential defect in the law of the land, and the fallibility of all human reasoning. What distorted impression might not so appalling an event make upon one so young, so feminine, so inexperienced! What exaggerated wild thing might she not say, unintentionally inculpating half Witch-Face Mountain in robbery and murder!

Constant Hite, as he bluffly entered the passageway, his head up, his eyes wide and bright, his vigorous step elastic and light, gave no token of the spiritual war he had waged as he came. Already he felt in great jeopardy. On account of his illicit vocation he could ill abide the scrutiny of the law. With scant proof, he argued, a moonshiner might be suspected of highway robbery and murder. As he had journeyed hither with the constable and his fellows, who conserved the air of disinterested spectators, but who he knew had been summoned to aid the officer in case he should evade or delay, when he would have been forthwith arrested, he had been sorely tempted to deny having ever seen the stranger, in whose company he had spent an hour or so of the previous day. He had been able to put the lie from him with a normal

moral impulse. He did not appreciate the turpitude of perjury. He esteemed it only a natural lie invested with pomp and circumstance; and the New Testament on which he should be sworn meant no more to his unlettered conscience than the horn-book, since he knew as little of its contents. But a lie is a skulking thing, and he had scant affinity with it.

He thought, with a sort of numb wonderment, that it was strange he should feel no more compassion for the object stretched out here, dumb, dead, bruised, and bloody, which so short a space since he had seen full of life and interest, animated by a genial courtesy and graced with learning and subtle insight; now so unknowing, so unlettered, so blind! Whither went this ethereal investiture of life? — for it was not mere being; one might exist hardily enough without it. Did the darkness close over it, too, or was it not the germ of the soul, the budding of that wider knowledge and finer aspiration to flower hereafter in rarer air? He did not know; he only vaguely cared, and he reproached himself dully that he cared no more. For he — his life was threatened! With the renewal of the thought he experienced a certain animosity toward the man that he should not have known enough to take better care of himself. Why must he needs die here, in this horrible unex-

plained way, and leave other men, chance associates, to risk stretching hemp for murder? He felt his strong life beating in his throat almost to suffocation at the mere suggestion. Again the lie tempted him, to be again withstood; and as he strode into the room upon the calling of his name, he saw how futile, how flimsy, was every device, for, fluttering in the coroner's hand, he recognized the sketch of the "Witch-Face" which the dead man had made, and the masterly drawing of his own imposing figure in the foreground. He had forgotten it utterly for the time being. In the surprise and confusion that had beset him, it had not occurred to him to speculate how he had chanced to be subpœnaed, how the idea could have occurred to the coroner that he knew aught of the stranger. As he stood against the batten door, the pale light from the interstices of the unchinked logs, all the grayer because it alternated with the sombre timbers, falling upon his face and figure, his hat upturned in front, revealing his brow with a forelock of straight black hair, his brilliant dark eyes, and his distinctly cut definite features, the sketch-book was swiftly passed from one to another of the jury, reluctantly relinquished here and there, and more than once eliciting half-smothered exclamations of delighted wonder from the unsophisticated moun-

taineers, as they glanced back and forth from the man leaning against the door to the counterfeit presentment on the paper.

Constant Hite experienced a glow of vicarious pride as he remembered the satisfaction that the artist had taken in the sketch, and he wished that that still thing on the bier could know how his work, most wonderful it seemed, was appreciated. And then, with a swift revulsion of feeling, he realized that it was this which had entrapped him; this bit of paper had brought him into fear and trouble and risk of his life. The man might be of the revenue force. He might have encountered other moonshiners, and thus have come to his violent death. If this were his vocation, it brought Hite into dark suspicion by virtue of the fact, known to a few of the neighborhood, that he himself was a distiller of brush whiskey. No one else had seen the stranger till the finding of the body. He gathered this from the trend of the inquiry after the formal preliminary queries. The seven men, as they sat together on a bench made by passing a plank between the logs of the wall diagonally across the corner of the room, chewed meditatively their quids of tobacco, and now and then spat profusely on the ground, their faces growing more perplexed and graver as the examination progressed.

When Hite disclosed the circumstance that on the previous day he had encountered a "stranger man" near the "Witch-Face," there was a palpable sensation among them. They glanced at one another meaningly, and a sudden irritation was perceptible in the coroner's manner as he sat in a rickety chair near the improvised bier. He was a citizen of the valley region, a trifle more sophisticated than the jury, and disposed to seriously deprecate the introduction of any morbid or superstitious element into so grave a matter. He had a bald head, a lean face, the bones very clearly defined about the temple and cheek and jaw, a scanty grizzled beard; and he was dressed somewhat farmer fashion, in blue jeans, with his boots drawn high over his trousers, but with a stiffly starched white shirt, — the collar and cravat in evidence, the cuffs, however, vanished up the big sleeves of his coat.

"The exact place of the meeting is not material," he said frowningly.

But Hite's mercurial interest in the drawing had revived anew.

"Thar she be," he exclaimed, so suddenly that the jury started with a common impulse, "the ole witch-face," — he pointed at the sketch in the coroner's hand, — "a mite ter the east an' a leetle south in the pictur', ez nat'ral ez life!"

One of the jurymen asked to see the sketch again. Evidently, in the hasty delineation of the contours of the slope they had not noticed the gigantic grimacing countenance which they all knew so well; the picturesque figure of the mountaineer in the foreground had so impressed the stranger that it was much more nearly complete than the landscape, being definite in every detail, and fully shaded. The book was handed along the row of men, each recognizing the semblance, once pointed out, with a touch of dismayed surprise that alarmed the coroner for the sanity of the verdict; his rational estimate rated spells and bewitchments and omens as far less plausible agencies in disaster than horse-thieves, highwaymen, and moonshiners.

"Look at the face of the deceased," he said, with a sort of spare enunciation, coercive somehow in its inexpressiveness. "Ye are sure ye never viewed that man afore yestiddy?"

"I hev said so an' swore it," said Hite, a trifle nettled.

"Ye rode in comp'ny a hour or mo' an' never asked his name?"

"I never axed him no questions, nor he me," replied Hite, "'ceptin' 'bout'n the witch-face. He was powerful streck by that. An' I tole him 't war a onlucky day."

The jury, a dreary row of unkempt heads,

and bearded anxious faces, and crouching shoulders askew, cleared their throats, and two uncrossed and recrossed their legs, the plank seat creaking ominously with the motion under their combined weight. A shade of disappointment was settling on the coroner's face. This was slight information indeed from the only person who had seen the man alive. There was silence for a moment. The splashing of the rain on the roof became drearily audible in the interval. The stir of the group in the space outside was asserted anew, with their low-toned fitful converse; a black-and-white ox in the weed-grown garden emitted a deep, depressed low of remonstrance against the rain, and the irking of the yoke, and the herbage just beyond his reach. The jurymen might see him through the logs, and now and again one of them mechanically ducked his head to look out upon the dismal aspect of the chimney and orchard, round which so many horses and wagons had not gathered since the daughter of the house was long ago married here. There was a sprinkle of gray in his hair, and he remembered the jollities of the wedding, — incongruous recollection, — and once more he looked at the stark figure, its face covered with a white cloth, which had been done in a sentiment of atonement for the unseemly publicity of its fate.

In sparsely settled communities, death, being rare, retains much of the terror which custom lessens in the dense crowds of cities. There death is met at every corner. It goes on 'Change. It sits upon the bench. It is chronicled in the columns of every newspaper. Daily its bells toll. Its melancholy pageantry traverses the streets of wealthy quarters, and it stalks abroad hourly in the slums, and few there are who gaze after it. But here it comes so seldom that its dread features are not made smug by familiarity. When Hite was told to look again at the face and see if memory might not have played him false, to make sure he had never seen the man before yesterday, he hesitated, and advanced with such reluctance, and started back, dropping the cloth, with such swift repulsion, that the coroner, habituated to such matters, gazed at him with a doubtful scrutiny.

"Oh, he looked nowise like that," he exclaimed in a raised, nervous voice that caught the attention of the crowd outside, and resulted in a sudden cessation of stir and colloquy, "though it 's him, sure enough! And," with a burst of regret, "he war a mighty pleasant man!"

The coroner, intentionally taking him at a disadvantage, asked abruptly, "What do you work at mostly?"

Hite turned shortly from the bier. "I farms

some," he hesitated; "dad bein' mos'ly out o' the field, nowadays, agin' so constant."

"What do you work at mostly?" reiterated the official.

Hite divined his suspicion. Some flying rumor had doubtless come to his ears, how credible, how unimpugnable, the moonshiner could not tell. Nevertheless, his loyalty to that secret vocation of his had become a part of his nature, so continuous were its demands upon his courage, his strategy, his foresight, his industry. It was tantamount to his instinct of self-defense. He held his head down, with his excited dark eyes looking up from under his brows at the coroner. But he would not speak. He would admit naught of what was evidently known.

"Warn't ye afeard he might be a revenuer?" suggested the officer.

"I never war afeard, so ter say, o' one man at a time," Hite ventured.

"Did n't ye think he might take a notion that you were a moonshiner?"

"He never showed no suspicion o' me, noways," replied Hite warily. "We rid tergether free an' favored. He 'peared a powerful book-l'arned man, — like no revenuer ever I see."

"Where did you part company?"

Hite sought to identify the spot by description; and then he was allowed to pass out, his spirits

flagging with the ordeal, and with the knowledge that his connection with the manufacture of brush whiskey was suspected by the coroner's jury, suggesting an adequate motive on his part for waylaying a stranger supposed to be of the revenue force. He felt the dash of the rain in his face as he stood aside to make way for the "valley man with the lung complaint," who was passing into the restricted apartment; and despite his whirl of anxiety and excitement and regret and resentment, he noted with a touch of surprise the cool unconcern of the man's face and manner, albeit duly grave and adjusted to the decorums of the melancholy occasion.

He was sworn, and gave his name as Alan Selwyn. The jury listened with interest to his fluent account of his occupation in the valley, which had been mercantile, of his temporary residence here for a bronchial affection; and when he was asked to identify the man who had so mysteriously come to his death, they marked his quick, easy stride as he crossed the room, with his hat in his hand, and his unmoved countenance as he looked fixedly down into the face of the dead. He remained a longer interval than was usual with the witnesses, as if to make sure. Then, still quite businesslike and brisk, he stated that he could not identify him, having certainly never seen him before.

"The only papers which he had on him," said the coroner, watching the effect of his words, "were two letters addressed to you."

The young man started in palpable surprise. As he looked at the exterior of the letters, which were stamped and postmarked, he observed that they must have been taken out of the post-office at Sandford Cross-Roads, to expedite their delivery; the postmaster doubtless consenting to this request on the part of so reputable-looking a person or a possible acquaintance.

"Were you expecting a visitor?" asked the coroner.

"Not at all," responded the puzzled witness.

He was requested to open the letters, read and show them. But he waived this courtesy, asking the coroner to open and read them to the jury. They were of no moment, both on matters of casual business, and Mr. Alan Selwyn was dismissed; the coroner blandly regretting that, in view of his malady, he had been required to come out in so chilly a rain.

Notwithstanding his composure he was in some haste to be gone. He went quickly through the crowd, drawing down his hat over his brow, and deftly buttoning his overcoat across his chest and throat. He had reached his horse, and had placed one foot in the stirrup, when, chancing to glance back over his shoulder, he saw Narcissa

Hanway's white, flowerlike face, her bonnet pushed far back on her tawny yellow hair, both arms outstretched in a gesture of negation and repulsion toward the apartment where the jury sat, while a dark-haired, slow man urged her forward, one hand on her shoulder, and the old mountain woman followed with insistence and encouragement. He hesitated for a moment; then putting spurs to his horse, he rode off swiftly through the slanting lines of rain.

III.

A sense of helplessness in the hands of fate is in some sort conducive to courage. Doubtless many an act of valor which has won the world's applause was precipitated in a degree by desperation and the lack of an alternative. The appearance of stolidity with which the cluster of witnesses — those whose testimony was yet to be given as well as those who had told the little they knew — noted the uncontrolled agitation, the wild eyes, the hysteric sobs, with which Narcissa Hanway was ushered into the contracted apartment where the inquest was in progress, had no correlative calmness of mind or heart. What haphazard accusation might not result from her fear, or her desire to shield another, or the mere undisciplined horror of the place and the fact! When one dreads the sheer possibilities,

the extremes of terror are reached. More than one of the bearded, unkempt, hardy mountaineers, trudging back and forth in the sheltered space beneath the loft, steadily chewing their quids of tobacco and eying the rain, would have fled incontinently, had there been any place to run to out of reach of the constable, who was particularly brisk to-day, participating in exercises of so unusual an interest. The girl's brother, standing beside the door after she had passed within, was unconscious of a certain keen covert scrutiny of which he was the subject. He had a square determined face, dark hair, slow gray eyes, and a tall powerful frame; he held his head downward, his hand on the door, his even teeth set in the intensity of his effort to distinguish the voices within. There had been some secret speculation as to whether the man were altogether unknown to the brother and sister, such deep feeling she had evinced, such coercion he had exerted to induce her to give her testimony. Still, the girl was a mere slip of a thing, unused to horrors; and as to recalcitrant witnesses, they all knew the jail had a welcome for the silent until such time as they might find a voice. Nevertheless, though his urgency had been in the stead of the constable's stronger measures, they eyed him askance as he stood and sought to listen, with his hand on the

door. The old woman turned around, her arms falling to her sides with a sort of flounce of triumph, her eyes twinkling beneath the shining spectacles set upon her brow among the limp ruffles of her thrust-back sunbonnet, a laugh of satisfaction widening her wrinkled face. "Thar now!" she chuckled, "Nar'sa jes' set it down she *would n't* testify, an' crossed her heart an' hoped she 'd fall dead fust. But, Ben, we beat her that time!" and she chuckled anew.

The man answered not a word, and listened to the tumult within.

It is seldom, doubtless, that the patience of a coroner's jury is subjected to so strong a strain. But the information which had so far been elicited was hardly more than the bare circumstance which the body presented, — a man had ridden here, a stranger, and he was dead. If the girl knew more than this, it would necessitate some care in the examination to secure the facts. She was young, singularly willful and irresponsible, and evidently overcome by grief, or fear, or simply horror. When she was asked to look at the face of the stranger, she only caught a glimpse of it, as if by accident, and turned away, pulling her white bonnet down over her face, and declaring that she would not. "I hev viewed him wunst, an' I won't look at him again," she protested, with a burst of sobs.

"Now set down in this cheer, daughter, an' tell us what ye know about it all, — easy an' quiet," said the coroner in a soothing, paternal strain.

"Oh, nuthin', nuthin'!" exclaimed the girl, throwing herself into the chair in the attitude of an abandonment of grief.

"Air ye cryin' 'kase ye war 'quainted with him ennywise?" demanded one of the jurymen, with a quickening interest. He was a neighbor; that is, counting as propinquity a distance of ten miles.

The girl lifted her head suddenly. "I never seen him till yestiddy," she protested steadily. "I be a heap apter ter weep 'kase my 'quaintances *ain't* dead!" She gave him a composed, sarcastic smile, then fell to laughing and crying together.

To the others the discomfiture of their *confrère* was the first touch of comedy relief in the tragic situation. They cast at one another a glance of appreciation trenching on a smile, and the abashed questioner drew out a plug of tobacco, and with a manner of preoccupation gnawed a bit from it; then replaced it in his pocket, with a physical contortion which caused the plank on which the jury were seated to creak ominously, to the manifest anxiety of the worthies ranged thereon.

"How did you happen to see the man?" he asked, as if he had perceived no significance in her previous answer.

"'Kase I did n't happen ter be blind," her half-muffled voice replied. Her arm was thrown over the back of the chair, and her face was hidden on her elbow.

The coroner interposed quickly: "Where were you goin', an' what did you see?"

She sobbed aloud for a moment. Then ensued an interval of silence. Suddenly the interest of the subject seemed to lay hold upon her, and she began to speak very rapidly, lifting her white tear-stained face, and pushing her bonnet back on her rough curling auburn hair: —

"I war a-blackberryin', thar bein' only a few lef' yit, an' I went fur an' furder yit from home; an' ez I kem out'n the woods over yon," half rising, and pointing with a free gesture, "I viewed — or yit I *'lowed* I viewed — the witch-face through a bunch o' honey locust, the leaves bein' drapped a'ready, they bein' always the fust o' the year ter git bare. An' stiddier leavin' it be, I sot my bucket o' berries at the foot o' a tree', an started down the slope todes the bluff, ter make sure an' view it clar o' the trees." The girl paused, her eyes widening, her voice faltering, her breath coming fast. "An' goin' swift, some hawgs, stray, half grown, 'bout twenty shoats

feedin' in the woods — my rustlin' in the bushes skeered 'em I reckon — they sot out to run, possessed by the devil, like them the Scriptur' tells about." She paused again, panting, her hand to her heart.

The disaffected juryman turned to one side, recrossing his legs, and spitting disparagingly on the ground. "She can't swear them hawgs war possessed by the devil," he said in a low tone to his next neighbor.

"Oh, why not," exclaimed the girl, "when we know so many men air possessed by the devil, — why not them shoats, bein' jes' without clothes, an' without the gift o' speech to mark the diff'unce!"

She paused again, and the coroner, standing a trifle back of her chair, shook his head at the obstructive juryman, and asked her in a commonplace voice what the hogs had to do with it.

"That 's what I wanter know!" she cried, half turning in her chair to look up at him. "I started 'em, an' I be at the bottom o' it all, ef it 's like I think, — *me*, yearnin' ter look at the old witch-face! The hawgs run through the woods like fire on dry grass, an' I be 'feared they skeered the stranger man's horse — he had none whenst I seen him, though. I hearn loud talkin', or hollerin', a cornsiderable piece off, an' then gallopin' hoofs" —

"More horses than one, do you think?" demanded the coroner.

"Oh, how kin I swear to that? I seen none. Fur when I got thar, this man war lyin' in the herder's trail, bruised and bloody — oh, like ye see — an' his eyes opened; an' he gin a sort o' gasp whenst I tuk his han' — an' he war dead. An' I skeered the hawgs, an' they skeered his horse, an' he killed him; an' I be 'sponsible fur it all, an' I wisht ye 'd hang me fur it quick, an' be done with it!"

She burst into sobs once more, and hid her face on her arm on the back of the chair. Then, suddenly lifting her head, she resumed: "I jes' called and called Ben, an' bein' he hain't never fur off, he hearn me, an' kem. An' then he rid fur the neighbors, an' kem down the valley arter you-uns," with a side glance at the coroner. "An' he lef' me a shootin'-iron, in case of a fox, or a wolf, or suthin' kem along. 'Bout sunset the neighbors kem. An' till then I sot thar keepin' watch, an' a-viewin' the witch-face 'crost the Cove, plumb till the sun went down."

She bowed her head again on her arm, and a momentary silence ensued. Then the coroner, clearing his throat, said reassuringly, "Thar ain't nuthin' in the witch-face, nohow. It 's jes' a notion. Man and boy, I have knowed that hillside fur forty year, an' I never could see no

witch-face; it 's been p'inted out ter me a thousand times."

She looked at him in dumb amazement for a moment; then broke out, "Waal, what would ye think ef ye hed seen, like me, the witch-face shining in the darkest night, nigh on ter midnight, like the ole 'oman had lighted her a candle somewhars, — jes' shinin', an' grinnin', an' mockin', plain ez daybreak? That 's what *I* hev viewed — an' I 'low ter view it agin — oh, I do, I do!"

He looked at her hard, but he did not say what he thought, and the faces of the jurymen, which had implied a strong exception to his declaration of skepticism touching the existence of the ominous facial outline on the hillside, underwent a sudden change of expression. She was hardly responsible, they considered, and her last incredible assertion had gone far to nullify the effect of her previous testimony. She was overcome by the nervous shock, or had told less than she knew and was still concealing somewhat, or was so credulous and plastic and fanciful as to be hardly worthy of belief. She was dismissed earlier than she had dared to hope: and with this deterioration of the testimony of the witness who was nearest the time and place of the disaster, the jury presently went to work to evolve out of so slender a thread of fact and so knotty a tangle of possibility their verdict.

For a long time, it seemed to the curious without, and to the agitated, nervous witnesses peering through the unchinked logs of the wall, they sat on their comfortless perch, half crouching forward, and chewed, and discussed the testimony. There were frequent intervals of silence, and in one of these Con Hite was disturbed to see the sketch of the "witch-face" once more passed from hand to hand. They grew to have a harried, baited look; and after a time, the rain having slackened, they came out in a body, and walked to and fro quite silently in the clearing, chewing their quids and their knotty problem, with apparently as much chance of getting to the completion of the one as of the other. They were evidently refreshed, however, by the change of posture and scene, for they soon resumed the subject and were arguing anew as they paused upon the bluff, their gestures wonderfully distinct, drawn upon the sea of mist that filled the valley below and the air above. It revealed naught of the earth, save here and there a headland, as it were, thrusting out its dark, narrow, attenuated demesne into the impalpable main. Further and further one might mark this semblance of a coast-line as the vapor grew more tenuous, till far away the series of shadowy gray promontories alternating with the colorless inlets was as vague of essence as the

land of a dream. Near at hand, a cucumber-tree, with its great broad green leaves and its deep red cones, leaning over the rocks, and spanning this illusive gray landscape from the zenith to the immediate foreground, gave the only touch of color to the scenic simulacrum in many a gradation of neutral tone. The jurymen hovered about under the boughs for a time, and then came back, still harassed and anxious, to their den, with perhaps some new question of doubt. For those without could perceive that once more they were crowding about the bier and talking together in knots. Again they called in the country physician who had testified earlier, an elderly personage, singularly long and thin and angular, but who had a keen, intent, clever face and the accent of an educated man. He seemed to reiterate some information in a clear, concise manner, and when he came out it was evident that he considered his utility here at an end, for he made straight for his horse and saddle.

A sudden sensation supervened among the outsiders, — a flutter, and then a breathless suspense; for within the inclosure, barred with the heavy shadows of the logs of the walls alternating with the misty intervals, could be seen the figures of the seven, successively stooping at the foot of the bier to sign each his name to the inquisition at last drawn up.

One by one they came slowly out, looking quite exhausted from their long restraint, the unwonted mental exercitations, and the nervous strain. Then it was developed, to the astonishment and disappointment of the little crowd, tingling with excitement and anxiety, that this document simply set forth the fact that at an inquisition holden on Witch-Face Mountain, Kildeer County, before Jeremiah Flaxman, coroner, upon the body of an unknown man, there lying dead, the jurors whose names were subscribed thereto, upon their oaths, did say that he came to his death from concussion of the brain consequent upon being thrown or dragged from his horse by means or by persons to the jury unknown.

There was a palpable dismay on Constant Hite's expressive face. He had hoped that the verdict might be death by accident. Others had expected the implication of horse-thieves, of whose existence the jury being of the neighborhood were well advised, and the disappearance of the man's horse might well suggest this explanation. The coroner would return this inquisition to the criminal court together with a list of the material witnesses. Thus the matter was left as undecided as before the inquest, the jeopardy, the terrors of circumstantial evidence, all still impending, dark with doom, like the black cloud which visibly overshadowed the landscape.

IV.

Since the knight-errantry of wolf and bear and catamount and fox has scant need of milestones, or signposts, or ferries, or the tender iteration of road-taxes, the casual glance might hardly perceive the necessity of opening a thoroughfare through this wilderness, for these freebooters seemed likely to be its chief beneficiaries. A more rugged district could not be found in all that massive upheaval of rocks and tangled wooded fastnesses stretching from the northeast to the southwest some twenty miles, and known as Witch-Face Mountain; a more scantily populated region than its slopes and adjacent coves scarcely exists in the length and breadth of the State of Tennessee. The physical possibilities were arrayed against the project, so steep was the comblike summit on either side, so heavy and tortuous the outcropping rock that served as the bony structure of the great mountain mass. True, the river pierced it, the denudation of solid sandstone cliffs, a thousand feet in height, betokening the untiring energy of the eroding currents of centuries agone. This agency, however, man might not summon to his aid, being "the act of God," to use the pious language of the express companies to describe certain contingencies for which they

very properly decline the responsibility. Against the preëmptions of the gigantic forests and the gaunt impassable crags and the abysmal river might be enlisted only such enterprise as was latent in the male inhabitants of the vicinity over eighteen years of age and under fifty, thus subject to the duty of working on the public roads. Nevertheless, the county court had, in a moment of sanguine exuberance, entertained and granted an application from the adjacent landowners to order a jury of view to lay out a public road and to report at the next quarterly session.

Precursors of the jury of view in some sort two young people might have seemed, one afternoon, a fortnight, perhaps, after the inquest, as they pushed through the woody tangles to the cliffs high above the river, the opposite bank of which was much nearer than the swirling currents, crystal brown in the romantic shadows below. They walked in single file, the jury of view in their minds, and now and then referred to in their sparse speech.

"Mought make it along hyar, Ben." The girl, in advance, paused, bareheaded, each uplifted hand holding out a string of her white sunbonnet, which, thus distended, was poised, winglike, behind the rough tangle of auburn hair and against the amber sky. She turned as

she spoke, to face her companion, taking a step or two backward as she awaited his answer.

"Look out how ye air a-walkin', Narcissa! Ye 'll go over the bluff back'ards, fust thing ye know," the man called out eagerly, and with a break of anxiety in his voice.

She stretched the sunbonnet still wider with her upreaching arms, and with a smile of tantalizing glee, showing her white teeth and narrowing her brown eyes, she continued to walk backward toward the precipice, — with short steps, however; cautious enough, doubtless, but calculated to alarm one whose affection had given much acuteness to fear.

Still at too great a distance for interference, Ben affected indifference. "We-uns 'll hev the coroner's jury hyar agin, afore the jury o' view, ef ye keep on; an' ye ain't got on yer bes' caliker coat, noways."

He climbed swiftly up the ascent and joined her, out of breath and with an angry gleam in his eyes. But she had turned her face and steps in the opposite direction, the mirth of the situation extinguished for the present.

"Quit talkin' that-a-way 'bout sech turr'ble, turr'ble things!" she cried petulantly, making a motion as if to strike him, futile at the distance, and with her frowning face averted.

"Sech ez yer new coat? I 'lowed 't war the

apple o' yer eye," he rejoined with a feint of banter.

She held her face down, with her features drawn and her eyes half closed, rejecting the vision of recollection as if it were the sight itself. "I can't abide the name o' cor'ner's jury, — I never wants ter hear it nor see it agin! I never shall furgit how them men all looked a-viewin' the traveler's body what I fund dead in the road; they looked like jes' so many solemn, peekin', heejus black buzzards crowdin' aroun' the corpse; then a-noddin' an' a-whisperin' tergether, an' a-findin' of a verdic' ez they called it. They fund nuthin' at all. 'T war *me* ez done the findin'. I fund the man dead in the road. An' *I* ain't a-goin' ter be a witness no mo'. Nex' time the law wants me fur a witness I 'll go ter jail; it 's cheerfuller, a heap, I 'll bet!"

As she still held her head down, her bonnet well on it now, her face with its *riant* cast of features incongruously woebegone, overshadowed by the tragedy she recounted even more definitely than by the brim of her headgear or the first gray advance of the dusk, he made a clumsy effort to divert her attention.

"I 'lowed ye war mightily in favor of juries; ye talk mighty nigh all day 'bout the jury of view."

"I want a road up hyar," she exclaimed

vivaciously, raising her eyes and her joyous transfigured face, "a reg'lar county road! In the fall o' the year the folks would kem wagonin' thar chestnuts over ter sell in town, an' camp out. An' all the mounting would go up an' down it past our big gate ter the church house in the Cove. I 'd never want ter hear no mo' preachin'. I 'd jes' set on our front porch, an' look, an' look, an' look!"

She cast up her great bright eyes with as vivid and immediate an irradiation as if the brilliant procession which she pictured deployed even now, chiefly in ox-wagons, before them. She caught off her bonnet from her head, — it seemed a sort of moral barometer; she never wore it when the indications of the inner atmosphere set fair. She swung it gayly by one string as she walked and talked; now and again she held the string to her lips and bit it with her strong, even teeth, reckless of the havoc in the clumsy hem.

"Then county court days, — goin' to county court, an' comin' from county court, — sech passels an' passels o' folks! I wisht we-uns hed it afore the jury o' view kem, so we-uns mought view the jury o' view."

"It 's along o' the jury o' view ez we-uns will git the road, — ef we do git it," the young man said cautiously.

It was one of his self-imposed duties to moderate, as far as he might, his sister's views, to temper her enthusiasms and abate her various and easily excited anger. He had other duties toward her which might be said to have come to him as an inheritance.

"Ben 's the boy!" his consumptive mother had been wont to say; "he 's sorter slow, but mighty sure. 'Brag is a good dog, but Hold-Fast is a better.' Ef he don't sense nare 'nother idee in this life, he hev got ter l'arn ez it 's his business ter take keer o' Nar'sa. Folks say Nar'sa be spoiled a'ready. So be, fur whilst Ben be nuthin' but a boy he 'll l'arn ter do her bid, an' watch over her, an' wait on her, an' keer for her, an' think she be the top o' creation. It 'll make her proud an' headin', I know, — she 'll gin her stepmammy a sight o' trouble, an' I ain't edzactly lamentin' 'bout'n that, — but Ben 'll take keer o' her all her life, an' good keer, havin' been trained ter it from the fust."

But his mother had slept many a year in the little mountain graveyard, and her place was still empty. The worldly wise craft of the simple mountain woman, making what provision she might for the guardianship of her daughter, was rendered of scant effect, since her husband did not marry again. The household went on as if she still sat in her accustomed place, with not

one deficiency or disaster that might have served in its simple sort as a memorial, — so little important are we in our several spheres, so promptly do the ranks of life close up as we drop dead from their alignment.

The panoply against adversity with which Narcissa had been accoutred by a too anxious mother, instead of being means of defense, had become opportunities of oppression. Her brother's affectionate solicitude and submissiveness were accepted as her bounden due, as the two grew older; her father naturally adapted himself to the predominant sentiment of the household; and few homes can show a tyrant more arrogant and absolute than the mountain girl whose mother had so predicted for her much hardship and harshness, and a troubled and subordinate existence.

It was with that instinct to guard her from all the ills of life, great and small, that Ben sought to prepare her for a possible disappointment now.

"Mought n't git the road through, nohow, when all 's said," he suggested.

"What fur not?" she exclaimed, bringing her dark brows together above eyes that held a glitter of anger.

"Waal, some o' the owners won't sign the application, an' air goin' ter fight it in the Court."

She put her bonnet on, and looked from under its brim up at the amber sky. It was growing faintly green near the zenith, toward which the lofty topmost plumes of the dark green pines swayed. The great growths of the forest rose on every side. There was no view, no vista, save the infinitely repeated umbrageous tangle beneath the trees, where their boles stood more or less distinct or dusky till merged indefinitely into shadow and distance. Looking down into the river, one lost the sense of monotony. The ever-swirling lines of the current drew mystic scrolls on that wonderfully pellucid brown surface, — so pellucid that from the height above she could see a swiftly darting shadow which she knew was the reflection of a homeward-bound hawk in the skies higher yet. Leaves floated in a still, deep pool, were caught in a maddening eddy, and hurried frantically away, unwilling, frenzied, helpless, unknowing whither, never to return, — allegory of many a life outside those darkling solemn mountain woods, and of some, perhaps, in the midst of them. The reflection of the cliffs in the never still current, of the pines on their summits, of the changing sky growing deeper and deeper, till its amber tint, erstwhile so crystalline, became of a dull tawny opaqueness, she marked absently for a while as she cogitated on his answer.

"What makes 'em so contrairy, Ben?" she asked at last.

"Waal, old man Sneed 'lows thar 'll be a power o' cattle-thievin', with the road so open an' convenient. An' Jeremiah Sayres don't want ter pay no road-taxes. An' Silas Boyd 'lows he don't want ter be obligated ter work on no sech rough road ez this hyar one air obleeged ter be; an' I reckon, fust an' last, it *will* take a power o' elbow grease."

He paused, and looked about him at the great shelving masses of rock and the steep slants, repeated through leagues and leagues of mountain wilderness. Then seating himself on one of the ledges of the cliff, his feet dangling unconcernedly over the abysses below, he continued: "An' Con Hite, — he 's agin it, too."

She lifted her head, with a scornful rising flush.

"Con Hite dunno *what* he wants; *he* ain't got a ounce o' jedgmint."

"Waal, one thing he *don't* want is a road. He be 'feared it 'll go too close ter the still, an' the raiders will nose him out somehows. Now he be all snug in the bresh, an' the revenuers none the wiser."

"An' Con none the wiser, nuther," she flouted. "The raiders hev smoked out 'sperienced old mountain foxes a heap slyer 'n Con be. He

ain't got the gift. He can't hide nuthin'. I kin find out everythin' he knows by jes' lookin' in his eye."

"That 's just 'kase he 's fool enough ter set a heap o' store by ye, Nar'sa. He ain't so easy trapped."

"Fool enough fur ennythin'," she retorted.

"An' then thar 's old Dent Kirby. He 'lows the road will be obligated ter pass by the witch-face arter it gits over yander nigh ter the valley, whar the ruver squeezes through the mounting agin. He be always talkin' 'bout signs an' spells an' sech, an' he 'lows the very look o' the witch-face kerries bad luck, an' it 'll taint all ez goes for'ard an' back'ard a-nigh it."

"Ben," said the girl in a low voice, "do youuns b'lieve ef thar war passin' continual on a sure enough county road that thar cur'ous white light would kem on the old witch's face in the night-time? Ain't that a sort'n spell fur the dark an' the lonesomeness ter tarrify a few quaking dwellers round about? Surely many folks comin' an' goin' would n't see sech. Ghostful things ain't common in a crowd." She moved a little nearer her brother, and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Some folks can't see the witch-face at all, noways," he replied stolidly. "I hearn the coroner 'low he could n't."

Narcissa spoke with sudden asperity: "I reckon he hev got sense enough ter view a light whenst it shines inter his eyes. He 'pears ter be feeble-minded ginerally, and mought n't be able ter pick out the favor o' the features on the hillside, but surely he 'd blink ef a light war flickered inter his eyeballs."

The road was her precious scheme, and she steadfastly believed that with the order of the worshipful Quarterly County Court declaring it open, with a duly appointed overseer and a gang of assigned work-hands and the presidial fostering care of a road commissioner, the haggard old semblance must needs desist from supernatural emblazonment in the awe-stricken nights, and that logic and law would soon serve to exorcise its baleful influence.

Her mien grew graver as she reflected on the résumé of objections to the project. Her white bonnet threw a certain white reflection on her flushed face. Her eyes were downcast as she looked at the river below, the long lashes seeming almost to touch her cheek. She scarcely moved them as she turned her gaze upon her brother, who was still seated on the verge of the cliff.

"Waal, sir, I wonder that the pore old road petition hed life enough in it ter crawl ter the court-house door. With all them agin it, thar ain't nobody ter be fur it, sca'cely."

"Oh, yes," he admitted. "Them air fur it ez b'lieves highways improves proputty, an' hev got land lyin' right alongside whar the road is axed ter be run; them ez ain't got proputty alongside ain't nigh so anxious. But that thar strange valley man ez they say hev got a lung complaint, he won't sign nuther. He owns the house he built up thar on the flat o' the mounting an' cornsider'ble land, though he don't keep no stock nor nuthin'. 'Lows the air be soft an' good for the lung complaint. He 'lows he hev been tryin' ter git shet o' the railroads an' dirt roads an' human folks, an' he s'posed he *hed* run ter the jumpin'-off place, the e-ends o' the yearth; but hyar kems the road o' civilization a-pursuin' him like the sarpient o' the Pit, with the knowledge o' good an' evil, — a grain o' wheat an' a bushel o' chaff, — an' he reckons he 'll hev ter cut an' run again."

Narcissa's lips parted slightly. She listened in amazement to this strange account of an aversion to that gay world in processional, chiefly in white-covered wagons, which she longed to see come down the county road.

"He be a powerful queer man," said Ben slowly, "this hyar Alan Selwyn."

And she felt that this was true.

She sat down beside her brother on the rock, and together they looked down meditatively on

the river. It was reddening now with the reflection of the reddening clouds. The water, nevertheless, asserted itself. Lengths of steely brilliancy showed now and again amidst the roseate suffusion, and anon spaces glimmered vacant of all but a dusky brown suggestion of depth and a liquid lustre.

"Nar'sa," he said at last in a low voice, "ye know they 'lowed that the traveler what war killed, some say by his runaway horse, war a-comin' ter see *him*, — this Alan Selwyn."

The white bonnet seemed to focus and retain the lingering light in the landscape. Without its aid he might hardly have made shift to see her face.

"They 'lowed they knowed so by the papers the traveler had on him, though this Selwyn 'lowed *he* could n't identify the dead man," he continued after a pause.

She gazed wonderingly at him, then absently down at the sudden scintillating white glitter of the reflection of the evening star in the dusky red water. It burned with a yet purer, calmer radiance in the roseate skies. She felt the weight of the darkening gloom, gathering beneath the trees around her, as if it hung palpably on her shoulders.

"Waal," he resumed, "I b'lieve ef that thar traveler had been able ter speak ter ye when ye

fund him, like ye said he tried ter do, I b'lieve he would hev tole ye suthin' 'bout that thar valley man. *He* 's enough likelier ter hev hed suthin' ter do with the suddint takin' off o' the feller than Con Hite."

Her face was suddenly aghast. "Who says Con Hite — Why?" She paused, her voice failing.

"Waal, ye know Con be a-moonshinin' again, an' some 'lows ez this hyar traveler warn't a traveler at all, but a revenuer, — strayed off somehows from the rest o' 'em."

"Oh, how I wish he 'd stop moonshinin' an' sech!"

She moved so suddenly on the edge of the precipice, as she lifted her hands and drew down her sunbonnet over her face, that Ben's glance was full of terror.

"Move back a mite, Nar'sa; ye 'll go over the bluff, fust thing ye know! Yes, Con 's mighty wrong ter be moonshinin'. The law is the right thing. It purtects us. It holps us all. We-uns owe it obejiunce, like I hearn a man say in a speech down yander in" —

"The law!" cried Narcissa, with scorn. "Con Hite kin tromp on the revenue law from hyar ter the witch-face, fur all I keer. Purtects! I pity a man ez waits fur the law ter purtect him; it 's a heap apter ter grind him ter pomace.

I mind moonshinin' 'kase it 's dangersome fur the moonshiners. The law — I don't count the fibble old law!"

She sat brooding for a time, her face downcast. Then she spoke in a low voice: —

"Why n't ye find out, Ben? What ails ye ter be so good-fur-nuthin'? Thar be other folks beside Con ez air law-breakers." She edged nearer to him, laying her hand on his arm. "Ye 've got to find out, Ben," she said insistently. "Keep an eye on that thar valley man, an' find out all 'bout'n him. Else the killin' 'll be laid ter Con, who never done nuthin' hurtful ter nobody in all his life."

"The idee jes' streck me ter-day whenst I viewed him along about that road. Whenst that thar dead man tuk yer han' an' tried ter find a word of speech — Why, hullo, Narcissa!"

With a short cry she had struggled to her feet. The gathering gloom, the recollection of the tragedy, the association of ideas, bore too heavily on her nerves. She struck petulantly at his astounded face.

"Why air ye always remindin' me?" she exclaimed, with a sharp upbraiding note. And then she began to cry out that she could see again the coroner's jury pressing close about the corpse, with a keen ravenous interest like

the vile mountain vultures, and then colloguing together aside, and nodding their heads and saying they had found their verdict, when they had found nothing, not even the poor dead man; and she saw them here, and she saw them there, and everywhere in the darkling mountain woods, and she would see them everywhere as long as she should live, and she wished with all her heart that they were every one at the bottom of the black mountain river.

And the slow Ben wondered, as he sought to soothe her and take her home, that a woman should be so sensitive to the mention of one dead man, and yet given to such wishes of the wholesale destruction of the harmless coroner's jury, because their appearance struck her amiss, and they collogued together, and nodded their heads unacceptably, and found their verdict.

V.

Except in so far as his sedulously cultivated fraternal sentiments were concerned, the peculiar domestic training to which Ben Hanway had been subjected had had slight effect in softening a somewhat hard and stern character. To continue the canine simile by which his mother had described him, his gentleness and watchful care toward his sister were not more reassuring to the public at large than is the tender loyalty

of a guard-dog toward the infant of a house which claims his fealty; that the dog does not bite the baby is no fair augury that he will not bite the peddler or the prowler. The fact that the traveler had borne letters addressed to Alan Selwyn, and no other papers, and yet Alan Selwyn could not or would not identify him, had already furnished Hanway with an ever-recurrent subject of cogitation. It had been the presumption of the coroner's jury, since confirmed by inquiry of the postmaster, that, going for some purpose to Alan Selwyn's lodge in the wilderness, the unknown traveler had, in passing, called for his prospective host's mail at the Cross-Roads, some fifteen miles distant and the nearest post-office, such being the courtesy of the region. A visitor often insured a welcome by thus voluntarily expediting the delivery of the mail some days, or perhaps some weeks, before its recipient could have hoped to receive it otherwise. Hanway had long been cognizant of this habit of the Cross-Roads postmaster to accede to such requests on the part of reputable people, but he was reminded forcibly of it the next morning. A neighbor, homeward bound from a visit to the valley, had paused at Hanway's house to leave a letter, with which he had charged himself, addressed to Selwyn.

"I 'lowed ye mought be ridin' over thar some

day, bein' ez ye air toler'ble nigh neighbors," he said.

And Hanway the more willingly undertook the delivery of the missive since it afforded him a pretext for the reconnoissance which he had already contemplated.

Rain-clouds had succeeded those fine aerial flauntings of the sunset splendors, and he set out in the pervasive drizzle of a gray day. Torn and ragged with the rain and the gusts, the white mist seemed to come to meet him along the vistas of the dreary dripping woods. The tall trees that shut off the sky loomed loftily through it. Sometimes, as the wind quickened, it deployed in great luminously white columns, following the invisible curves of the atmospheric current; and anon, in flaky detached fragments, it fled dispersed down the avenues like the scattered stragglers of a routed army. The wind was having the best of the contest; and though it still rained when he reached the vicinity of Alan Selwyn's lonely dwelling, the mist was gone, the clouds were all resolved into the steady fall of the torrents, and the little house on the slope of the mountain and all its surroundings were visible.

A log cabin it was, containing two rooms and the unaccustomed luxury of glass windows; so new that the hewn cedar logs had not yet weath-

ered to the habitual dull gray tone, but glowed jauntily red as the timbers alternated with the white and yellow daubing. A stanch stone chimney seemed an unnecessary note of ostentation, since the more usual structure of clay and sticks might serve as well. It reminded Ben Hanway that its occupant was not native to the place, and whetted anew his curiosity as he looked about, the reins on his horse's neck in his slow approach. It was a sheltered spot; the great mountain's curving summit rose high toward the north and west above the depression where the cabin stood; across the narrow valley a still more elevated range intercepted the east wind. Only to the south was the limited plateau open, sloping down to great cliffs, giving upon a vast expanse of mountain and valley and plain and far reaches of undulating country, promising in fair weather high, pure, soft air, a tempered gentle breeze, and the best that the sun can do.

He noted the advantages of the situation in reference to the "lung complaint," feeling a loser in some sort; for he had begun to suspect that the consumptive tendencies of the stranger were a vain pretense, assumed merely to delude the unwary. He could not have doubted long, for when he dismounted and hitched his horse to the rail fence he heard the door of the house

open, and as its owner, standing on the threshold in the wind and the gusty rain, called out to him a welcoming "Hello," the word was followed by a series of hacking coughs which told their story as definitely as a medical certificate.

Ben Hanway was not a humane man in any special sense, but he was conscious of haste in concluding the tethering of the animal and in striding across the vacant weed-grown yard striped with the ever-descending rain.

"Ye 'd better git in out'n all this wind an' rain," he said in his rough voice. "A power o' dampness in the air."

"No matter. There 's no discount on me. Don't take cold nowadays. I 've got right well here already."

The passage-way was dark, but the room into which Ben was ushered, illumined by two opposite windows, was as bright as the day would allow. A roaring wood fire in the great chimney-place reinforced the pallid gray light with glancing red and yellow fluctuations. The apartment was comfortable enough, although its uses were evidently multifarious, — partly kitchen, and dining-room, and sitting-room. Its furniture consisted of several plain wooden chairs, a table and crockery, a few books on a shelf, a lounge in the corner, and a rifle, after the manner of the mountaineers, over the mantel-

piece. Upon the shelf a cheap clock ticked away the weary minutes of the lonely hours of the long empty days while the valley man abode here, exiled from home and friends and his accustomed sphere, and fought out that hopeless fight for his life.

Ben Hanway gave him a keen, covert stare, as he slowly and clumsily accepted the tendered chair and his host threw another log on the fire. Hanway had seen him previously, when Selwyn testified before the coroner's jury, but to-day he impressed his visitor differently. He was tall and slight, twenty-five years of age, perhaps, with light brown hair, sleek and shining and short, a quick blue eye, a fair complexion with a brilliant flush, and a long mustache. But the bizarre effect produced by this smiling apparition in the jaws of death seemed to Hanway's limited experience curiously enhanced by his attire. Its special peculiarity was an old smoking-jacket, out at the elbows, ragged at the cuffs, and frayed at the silk collar; Hanway had never before seen a man wear a red coat, or such foot-gear as the slipshod embroidered velvet slippers in which he shuffled to a chair and sat down, tilted back, with his hands in the pockets of his gray trousers. To be sure, he could but be grave when testifying before a coroner's jury, but Hanway was hardly prepared

for such exuberant cheerfulness as his manner, his attire, and his face seemed to indicate.

"Ain't ye sorter lonesome over hyar?" he ventured.

"You bet your sweet life I am," his host replied unequivocally. A shade crossed his face, and vanished in an instant. "But then," he argued, "I did n't have such a soft thing where I was. I was a clerk — that is, a bookkeeper — on a salary, and I had to work all day, and sometimes nearly all night!"

He belittled his former vocation with airy contempt, as if he did not yearn for it with every fibre of his being, — its utility, its competence, its future. The recollection of the very feel of the fair smooth paper under his hand, the delicate hair-line chirography trailing off so fast from the swift pen, could wring a pang from him. He might even have esteemed an oath more binding sworn on a ledger than on the New Testament.

"And we were a small house, anyway, and the salary was no great shakes," he continued jauntily, to show how little he had to regret.

"An' now ye ain't got nuthin' ter do but ter read yer book," said the mountaineer acquiescently, realizing, in spite of his clumsy mental processes, how the thorn pierced the bosom pressed against it.

Selwyn followed his guest's glance to the shelf of volumes with an unaffected indifference.

"Yes, but I don't care for it. I wish I did, since I have the time. But the liking for books has to be cultivated, like a taste for beer; they are both a deal too sedative for me!" The laugh that ensued was choked with a cough, and the tactless Hanway was moved to expostulate.

"I wonder ye ain't 'feared ter be hyar all by yerse'f hevin' the lung complaint."

"Why, man alive, I 'm well, or so near it there 's no use talking. I could go home to-morrow, except, as I have had the house built, I think I 'd better stay the winter in it. But before the cold weather comes on they are going to send up a darky to look after me. I only hope *I* won't have to wait on *him*, — awful lazy nigger! He used to be a porter of ours. Loafing around these woods with a gun on his shoulder, pretending to hunt, will be just about his size. He 's out of a job now, and comes cheap. I couldn't afford to pay him wages all the time, but winter is winter."

He was silent a moment, gazing into the fire; then Hanway, gloomily brooding and disturbed, for the conversation had impressed him much as if it had been post-mortem, so immediate seemed his companion's doom, felt Selwyn's eye upon him, as if his sentiment were so obvious that the sense of sight had detected it.

"You think I 'm going to die up here all by myself. Now I tell you, my good fellow, dying is the very last thing that I expect to do."

He broke out laughing anew, and this time he did not cough.

Hanway could not at once cover his confusion. He looked frowningly down at the steam rising from his great cowhide boots, outstretched as they dried in the heat of the fire, and slowly shifted them one above the other. The flush on his sunburned cheek rose to the roots of his dark hair, and overspread his clumsy features. His appearance did not give token of any very great delicacy of feeling, but he regretted his transparency, and sought to nullify it.

"Not that," he said disingenuously; "but bein' all by yerse'f, I wonder ye ain't willin' fur the county road ter be put through. 'T would run right by yer gate, an' ye could h'ist the winder an' talk to the folks passin'. Ye would n't be lonely never."

For the first time Selwyn looked like a man of business. His eyes grew steady. His face was firm and serious and non-committal. He said nothing. Hanway cleared his throat and crossed his legs anew. The thought of his true intention in coming hither, not his ostensible errand, had recurred more than once to his

mind, — to lay bare the secret touching the visitor to Selwyn's remote dwelling, whom he could not or would not identify; and if there were aught amiss, as the mountaineer suspected, to take such action thereupon as in the fullness of his own good judgment seemed fit. But since the man was evidently so sharp, Hanway had hitherto feared even indirectly to trench upon it; here, however, the opening was so natural, so propitious, that he was fain to take advantage of it.

"An' see," he resumed, "what dangers kem o' hevin' no road. That thar man what war killed las' month, ef we hed hed a reg'lar county road, worked on an' kep' open, stiddier this hyar herder's trail, this-a-way an' that, he could hev rid along ez free an' favored, an' " —

"Why," Selwyn broke in, "the testimony was to the effect that he was riding a young, skittish horse, which was startled by stray hogs breaking at a dead run through the bushes, and that the horse bolted and ran away. And the man died from concussion of the brain. That would have happened if we had had a road of the first class, twenty feet wide, instead of this little seven-foot freak you all are so mashed on."

His face had not lost a tinge of its brilliant color. His animated eyes were still fired by that inward flame that was consuming his years,

his days, even his minutes, it might seem. His hands, fine, white, and delicate, were thrust jauntily into the pockets of his red jacket, and Hanway felt himself no nearer the heart of the mystery than before. The subject, evidently, was not avoided, held naught of menace. He went at it directly.

"Seems strange he war a-comin' ter visit youuns, an' hed yer mail in his pocket, an' ye never seen him afore," he hazarded, "nor knowed who he war."

"But I have found out since," Selwyn said, his clear eyes resting on his visitor without the vestige of an affrighted thought. "He was Mr. Keith, a chemist from Glaston; he was quite a notable authority on matters of physical science generally. I had written to him about — about some points of interest in the mountains, and as he was at leisure he concluded to come and investigate — and — take a holiday. He did n't let me know, and as I had never seen him I did n't at first even imagine it was he."

There was a silence. Selwyn's blue eyes dwelt on the fast-descending lines of rain that now blurred all view of the mountains; the globular drops here and there adhering to the pane, ever dissolving and ever renewed, obscured even the small privilege of a glimpse of the dooryard. The continual beat on the roof

had the regularity and the tireless suggestion of machinery.

"How did ye find out?" demanded Hanway, his theory evaporating into thin air.

"Why, as he did n't reply to my letter about a matter of such importance" — he checked himself suddenly, then went on more slowly — "it occurred to me that he might have decided to come, and might have been the man who was killed. So I wrote to his brother. He had not been expected at home earlier. His brother does n't incline to the foul-play theory. The horse he rode is a wild young animal that has run away two or three times. He had been warned repeatedly against riding that horse, but he thought him safe enough. The horse has returned home, — got there the day my letter was received. So the brother and an officer came and exhumed the body: he was buried, you know, after the inquest, over in the little graveyard yonder on the slope of the mountain."

Selwyn shivered slightly, and the fine white hands came out of the gaudy red pockets, and fastened the frogs beneath the lapels across his chest, to draw the smoking-jacket closer.

"Great Scott! what a fate, — to be left in that desolate burying-ground! Death is death, there."

"Death is death anywhar," said the mountaineer gloomily.

"No. Get you a mile or two of iron fence, and stone gates, and lots of sculptured marble angels around, and death is peace, or rest, or heaven, or paradise, according to your creed and the taste of the subject; but here you are done for and dead."

Hanway, in the limited experience of the mountaineer, could not follow the theory, and he forbore to press it further.

"Well," Selwyn resumed, "they took him home, and I was glad to see him go. I was glad to see them filling that hole up. I took a pious interest in that. I should have felt it was waiting for me. I shoveled some of the earth back myself."

The wind surged around the house, and shook the outer doors. The rain trampled on the roof like a squadron of cavalry. With his fate standing ever behind him, almost visibly looking over his shoulder, although he saw it not, the valley man was a pathetic object to the mountaineer. Hanway's eyes were hot and burned as he looked at him; if he had been but a little younger, they might have held tears. But Hanway had passed by several years his majority, and esteemed himself exempt from boyish softness.

Selwyn shook off the impression with a shiver, and bent forward to mend the fire.

"Where were you yesterday?" he asked, seeking a change of subject.

"At home sowin' turnip seed, mos'ly. I never hearn nuthin' 'bout'n it all."

Selwyn threw himself back in his chair, his brow corrugated impatiently at this renewal of the theme, and in the emergency he even resorted to the much-mooted point of the thoroughfare.

"I suppose all the family there are dead gone on that road?" he sought to make talk.

"Dad an' aunt M'nervy don't keer one way nor another, but my sister air plumb beset fur the jury of view to put it through."

"Why?" Selwyn had a mental vision of some elderly, thrifty mountain dame with a long head turned toward the enhancement of the values of a league or so of mountain land.

Hanway, slow and tenacious of impressions, could not so readily rouse a vital interest in another subject. He still gazed with melancholy eyes at the fire, and his heart felt heavy and sore.

"Waal," he answered mechanically, "she 'lows she wants ter see the folks go up an' down, an' up an' down."

Selwyn's blue eyes opened. "Folks?" he asked wonderingly. The rarest of apparitions on Witch-Face Mountain were "folks."

Hanway roused himself slightly, and raucously cleared his throat to explain.

"She 'lows thar 'll be cornsider'ble passin'. Folks, in the fall o' the year, mought be a-wagonin' of chestnuts over the mounting an' down ter Colb'ry; an' thar 's the Quarterly Court days; some attends, leastwise the jestices; an' whenst they hev preachin' in the Cove; an' wunst in a while thar *mought* be a camp-meetin'. She sets cornsider'ble store on lookin' at the folks ez will go up an' down."

There was a swift movement in the pupils of the valley man's eyes. It was an expression closely correlated to laughter, but the muscles of his face were still, and he remained decorously grave.

There was some thought in his mind that held him doubtful for a moment. His craft was cautious of its kind, and his manner was quite incidental as he said, "And the others of the family?"

"Thar ain't no others," returned Hanway, stolidly unmarking.

"Oh, so you are the eldest?"

"By five year. Narcissa ain't more 'n jes' turned eighteen."

The valley man's face was flushed more deeply still; his brilliant eyes were elated.

"*Narcissa!*" he cried, with the joy of de-

lighted identification. "She is the girl, then, that testified at the inquest. *Narcissa!*"

Hanway lifted his head, with a strong look of surly objection on his heavy features. Selwyn noted it with a glow of growing anger. He felt that he had said naught amiss. People could not expect their sisters to escape attracting notice, especially a sister with a remarkable name and endowed with a face like this one's.

"Narcissa, — that 's an odd name," he said, partly in bravado, and partly in justification of the propriety of his previous mention of her. "I knew a man once named Narcissus. Must be the feminine of Narcissus. Good name for her, though." The recollection of the white flower-like face, the corolla of red-gold hair, came over him. "Looks just like 'em."

Hanway, albeit all alert now, descried in this naught more poetical than the fact that Selwyn considered that his sister resembled a man of his acquaintance. As for that fairest of all spring flowers, it had never gladdened the backwoods range of his vision.

The exclusive tendency of the human mind is tested by this discovery of a casual resemblance to a stranger. One invariably sustains an affront at its mention. Whatever one's exterior may be, it possesses the unique merit of being one's own, and the aversion to share its traits

with another, and that other a stranger, is universal. In this instance the objection was enhanced by the fact that the stranger was a man; *ergo*, in Hanway's opinion, more or less clumsy and burly and ugly; the masculine type of his acquaintance presenting to his mind few of the superior elements of beauty. He resented the liberty the stranger took in resembling Narcissa, and he resented still more Selwyn's effrontery in discovering the likeness.

"Not ez much alike ez two black-eyed peas, now. I reckon not, — I reckon not," he sneered, as he rose to bring his visit to an end.

His host's words of incipient surprise were checked as Hanway slowly drew forth from his pocket a letter.

"Old man Binney war at the Cross-Roads Sad'day, an' he fotched up some mail fur the neighbors. He lef' this letter fur you-uns at our house, 'lowin' ez I would fetch it over."

Selwyn sat silent for a moment. He felt that severe reprehension and distrust which a man of business always manifests upon even the most trifling interference with his vested rights in his own mail matter. The rural method of aiding in distributing the mail was peculiarly unpalatable to him. He much preferred that his letters should lie in the post-office at the Cross-Roads until such time as it suited his con-

venience to saddle his horse and ride thither for them. The postmaster, on the contrary, seized the opportunity whenever responsible parties were "ridin' up inter the mounting" to entrust to them the neighborhood mail, thus expediting its delivery perhaps by three weeks, or even more, and receiving in every instance the benediction of his distant beneficiaries of the backwoods.

"I 'll write to the postmaster this very day!" Selwyn thought, as he tore the envelope open and mastered its contents at a swift glance. A half-suppressed but delighted excitement shone suddenly in his eyes, and smoothed every line of agitation and anxiety from his brow.

"I 'm a thousand times obliged to you for bringing it," he exclaimed, "and for staying awhile and talking! I wish you would come again. But I 'm coming to see you, to return your call." He laughed gayly at the sophisticated phrase. "Coming soon."

Hanway's growl of pretended pleasure in the prospect was rendered nearly inarticulate by the thought of Narcissa. He had not anticipated a return of the courtesy. He had no welcome for this stranger, and somehow he felt that he did not altogether understand Narcissa at times; that she had flights of fancy which were beyond him, and took a mischievous pleasure in tanta-

lizing him, and was freakish and hard to control.

Moreover, under the influence of this reaction of feeling, a modicum of his doubts of Selwyn had revived. Not that he suspected him, as heretofore, but a phrase that had earlier struck his attention came back to him. Selwyn had written, he said, to the traveler to come and "investigate," and he had hesitated and chosen his phrases, and half discarded them, and slurred over his statement. What was there to "investigate" in the mountains? What prospect of profit worth a long, lonely journey and a risk that ended in death? The capture of moonshiners was said to be a paying business, and an informer also reaped a reward. Hanway wondered if Con Hite could be the point of "investigation," if the dead man were indeed of the revenue force.

"Oh, you need n't shut the door on me," Selwyn said, as they stood together in the passage, and Hanway, with his instinct to cut him off, had made a motion to draw the door after him; "this mountain air is so bland, even when it is damp." He paused on the dripping threshold, with his hands in the pockets of his red jacket, and surveyed with smiling complacence the forlorn, weeping day, and the mountains cowering under their misty veil, and the sodden

dooryard, and the wild rocks and chasms of the gorge, adown the trough of which a stream unknown to the dry weather was tumbling with a suggestion of flight and trouble and fear in its precipitancy. "I 'm well, well as a bear; and I 'm getting fat as a bear, doing nothing. Feel my arm. I 'm just following the example of the bears about this time of the year, — hibernating, going into winter quarters. I 'm going to get this place into good shape to sell some day. I have bought that land over there all down the gorge from Squire Helm; and last July I bought all that slope at the tax sale, but that is subject to redemption; and then I am trying to buy in the rear of my wigwam, too, — a thousand acres."

"Ye kin sell it higher ef the road goes through," said Hanway doubtfully.

It seemed very odd that the man who protested that his stay in the mountains was so temporary, and whose stay in the world was evidently so short, should spend his obviously scanty substance in purchase after purchase of the worthless mountain wilderness. To be sure, the land was cheap, but it cost something. And Hanway looked again at the frayed cuffs and elbows of the red smoking-jacket. In his infrequent visits to Colbury, he had noted the variance of the men's costumes with the mountain standard of

dress. He saw naught like this, but he knew that if ever the sober burghers lent themselves to this sort of fantastic toggery, it was certainly whole.

"Say, my friend, what day does the jury of view hold forth?" Selwyn called out after the slouching figure, striped with the diagonal lines of rain and flouted by the wind, tramping across the weeds of the yard to his horse.

"Nex' Chewsday week," Hanway responded hoarsely.

"Well, if this weather holds out, it is to be hoped that the gentlemen of the jury are web-footed!" Selwyn exclaimed.

He shut the door, and as he went back to his lonely hearth his eyes fell upon the letter lying on the table.

"Now," he said as he took it again in his hand, "if fate should truly cut such a caper as to make my fortune in this forlorn exile, I could find it in my heart to laugh the longest and the loudest at the joke."

VI.

If it had been within the power of the worshipful Quarterly County Court to issue a mandamus to compel fair weather on that notable Tuesday when the jury of view were to set forth, the god of day could scarcely have obeyed with

more alacrity that peremptory writ once poetically ranked as "one of the flowers of the crown." The burnished yellow sunshine had a suggestion of joyous exuberance in its wide suffusions. Even the recurrent fluctuations of shadow but gave its pervasive sheen the effect of motion and added embellishment. The wind, hilarious, loud, piping gayly a tuneful stave, shepherded the clouds in the fair fields of the high sky, driving the flocculent white masses here and there as listed a changing will. The trees were red and yellow, the leaves firm, full-fleshed, as if the ebbing sap of summer still ran high in every fibre; their tint seemed no hectic dying taint, but some inherent chromatic richness. Fine avenues the eye might open amongst the rough brown boles that stood in dense ranks, preternaturally dark and distinct, washed by the recent rains, and thrown into prominence by the masses of yellow and red leaves carpeting the ground, and the red and yellow boughs hanging low above. They dispensed to the light, clarified air an aromatic richness that the lungs rejoiced to breathe, and all their flare of color might have seemed adequate illumination of their demesne without serving writs of mandamus on the sun; and indeed, the Quarterly County Court was fain to concern itself with far lesser matters, and wield slighter weapons. The jury of view,

in a close squad, ambling along at an easy gait, mounted on nags as diverse in appearance, age, and manner as the riders, sufficiently expressed its authority and their own diligence in its behests, and their spirits had risen to the propitious aspect of the weather and the occasion. Their advent into this secluded region of the district — for to secure a strict impartiality they were not of the immediate neighborhood, and had no interest which could be affected by their report — was not hailed with universal satisfaction.

"Jes' look at 'em, now," said old man Binney, as he stood in his door, leaning on his stick, to watch them pass, — "a jury o' view. An' who ever viewed a jury a-horseback afore? An' thar ain't but seben on 'em!" — laboriously counting, "five, six, seben. Thar 's *twelve* men on a sure enough jury! I counted the panel ez hung Ezekiel Tilbuts fur a-murderin' of his wife. I war thar in town whenst they fetched in thar verdic'. I dunno what the kentry be a-comin' ter! Shucks! I ain't a-goin' ter abide by the say-so o' no sech skimpy jury ez this hyar. I 'll go ter town an' see old Lawyer Gryce 'bout it, fust."

And with this extremest threat of vengeance he brought his stick down on the floor with so vigorous a thump that it had a certain profane effect; then having from under his bushy gray

eyebrows gazed at the diminishing group till it was but a dim speck in the distance, he went in muttering, banging the door as if to shut out and reject the sight. His objection might have been intensified had he known that the days were at hand when legislative wisdom would still further reduce this engine of the law, making it consist of one road commissioner and two freeholders, the trio still pridefully denominated a "jury of view."

Others, however, favoring the enterprise, cheerfully fell into the line of march; and as the way lengthened the cavalcade grew, mustering recruits as it went.

Disputatious voices suddenly sounded loud on the clear air in front of them, mingled with the thud of horses' hoofs, the jingle of spurs, and now and again the whinny of a colt; and at the intersection of the trail with a narrow winding path there rode into view old "Persimmon" Sneed, — as he was sometimes disrespectfully nicknamed, owing to a juvenile and voracious fondness for the most toothsome delicacy of autumn woods, — arguing loudly, and with a lordly intolerance of contradiction, with two men who accompanied him, while his sleek claybank mare also argued loudly with her colt. She had much ado to pace soberly forward, even under the coercion of whip and spur, while her madcap scion

galloped wildly ahead or lagged far in the rear, and made now and then excursions into the woods, out of sight, to gratify some adolescent curiosity, or perhaps, after the fashion of other and human adolescents, to relish the spectacle of the maternal anxiety. Ever and anon the sound of the mare's troubled call rang on the air. Then the colt would come with a burst of speed, a turbulent rush, out of the underbrush, and, with its keen head-tones of a whinny, all funnily treble and out of tune, dash on in advance. The rider of this preoccupied steed was a grizzled, lank, thin-visaged mountaineer, with a tuft of beard on his chin, but a shaven jowl, where, however, the black-and-gray stubble of several days' avoidance of the razor put forth unabashed. He shook his finger impressively at the jury of view as he approached them.

"Ef ye put this hyar road through my land," he said solemnly, "I 'll be teetotally ruinationed. The cattle-thievin' that 'll go on, with the woods so open an' the road so convenient, an' yit no travel sca'cely, will be a scandal ter the jay-bird. I won't hev so much lef' ez the horn of a muley cow!"

And with this extreme statement he whirled his horse and rode on at the head of the cavalcade in dignified silence. He was not a dweller in the immediate vicinity, but hailed from the

Cove, — a man of substance and a large cattle-owner, pasturing his herds, duly branded, on a tract of unfenced wilderness, his mountain lands, where they roamed in the safe solitudes of those deep seclusions during the summer, and were rounded up, well fattened, and driven home at the approach of winter. He was the typical man of convictions, one who entertains a serious belief that he possesses a governing conscience instead of an abiding delight in his own way. He had a keen eye, with an upward glance from under the brim of his big wool hat, and he looked alert to descry any encroachment on his vested rights to prescribe opinion. The jury of view were destined to find it a doubtful boon that the road law interposed no insurmountable obstacle to prevent their hearing thus informally the views of those interested.

Persimmon Sneed's deep feeling on the subject had been evinced by his dispensing with the customary salutations, and one of the jury of view, with a mollifying intention, observed that they would use their best judgment to promote the interests of all parties.

"Ai-yi!" said Persimmon Sneed, ruefully shaking his head. "But s'pose ye hev got mighty pore jedgmint? Ye 'll be like mos' folks I know, ef ye hev. I 'd ruther use my own best jedgmint, a sight."

At which another of the jury suavely remarked that they would seek to be impartial.

"That 's jes' what I kem along fur," exclaimed Persimmon Sneed triumphantly, — "ter show ye edzac'ly whar the bull's eye be. Thar ain't no use fur this road, an' ye air bound ter see it ef ye ain't nowise one-sided and partial."

The jury relapsed into silence and rode steadily on.

The true raw material of contradiction lay in three younger men among the spectators, contumacious, vehement, and, albeit opposed to the road, much inclined to spoke the wheel of old Persimmon Sneed, however that wheel might revolve.

"I got caught on a jury in a criminal case with him wunst," Silas Boyd, a heavy, thick-set, tall young fellow with a belligerent eye and a portentously square jaw, said *sotto voce* to his next comrade. "I hev sarved on a jury with him, — locked up fur a week 'thout no verdic'. He ain't got no respec' fur no other man's say-so. An' he talks 'bout *his* oath ez ef he war the only man in Tennessee ez ever war swore on the 'Holy Evangelists o' Almighty Gawd' in the courthouse. He fairly stamped on my feelin's, in that Jenkins case, ter make me agree with him; but I could n't agree, an' it hung the jury, ez they say. I wisht they hed hung the foreman! By Hokey, I despise a hard-headed, 'pinionated man."

"Look at his back," rejoined Jeremiah Sayres, a man of theory, who had a light undecided tint of hair and beard and scraggy mustache, and a blond complexion burned a permanent solid red by the summer sun. "I'd know his dispositions by his back." He waved his hand at the brown jeans coat that draped a spare and angular but singularly erect back, which scarcely seemed to move in response to the motions of the mare pacing briskly along. "What sorter back is that fur a man risin' fifty year old? — straight ez a ramrod, an' ez stiff. But, Silas, ef ever ye git the better o' him, ye hev got ter break it."

"I hearn his third wife married him ter git rid o' him," put in Peter Sims, given to gossip. "She 'lowed he warn't nigh so tarrifyin' 'roun' his own house, a-feedin' the peegs, an' ploughin' an' cuttin' wood, an' sech, *occupied somehows*, ez he war a-settin' up in his Sunday best at her house, with nuthin' ter do, allowin' she *hed* ter marry him, whether or not, 'kase he would n't hev 'No' fur a answer."

"An' look at it now!" exclaimed Silas Boyd, unexpectedly reinforced by the matrimonial phase of the question. "That thar man hev bodaciously argued an' contradicted two wimmin out'n this vale o' tears. An' everybody knows it takes a power o' contradiction to out-do a woman. He oughter be indicted for cold-blooded murder!

That 's what!" He nodded vindictively at the straight jeans-clad back in advance of him.

Over and again the party called a halt, to push about in search of a practicable seven-foot passage amongst crags and chasms, and to contend with the various insistence touching devious ways preferred by the honorary attendants, who often seemed to forget that they themselves were not in the exercise of a delegated jury duty. Tangles impeded, doubts beset them, although the axe by which the desired route had been blazed out aforetime by the petitioners had been zealous and active; but the part of a pioneer in a primeval wilderness is indeed the threading of a clueless labyrinth, and both sun and compass were consulted often before the continued direction of the road could be determined and located.

In such cases, to the lovers of the consistent in character, the respective traits of old Persimmon Sneed and Silas Boyd were displayed in all their pristine value; for although their interests were identical, both being opposed to the opening of the road, the dictatorial arrogations of the elder man and the pugnacious persistence of the younger served to antagonize them on many a minor point in question, subsidiary to the main issue, as definitely as if they were each arrayed against the other, instead of both being in arms under the "No Road" banner.

"Mighty nigh ez interestin' ez a dog-fight," said Jeremiah Sayres in an aside to one of the jury.

Midday found them considerably advanced on their way, but brought to a halt by an insistence on the part of Silas Boyd that the road should be diverted from a certain depression showing marshy tendencies to a rugged slope where the footing was dry but difficult.

"That 's under water more 'n haffen the winter, I 'll take my everlastin' oath. Ef the road runs thar, that piece will take enough mendin' in a season ter keep up ten mile o' dry road," he argued vehemently.

"Water ain't dangersome, nowise," retorted the elderly Persimmon, with a snarling smile. "Healthier 'n whiskey, my frien', — *heap* healthier 'n whiskey."

Boyd's serious countenance colored darkly red with wrath. Among the aggressive virtues of old Persimmon Sneed were certain whiskey-proof temperance principles, the recollection of which was peculiarly irritating to Silas Boyd, known to be more than ordinarily susceptible to proof whiskey.

"I be a perfessin' Baptis', Mr. Sneed," he retorted quickly. "I got no objection ter water, 'ceptin' fur the onregenerate an' spurners o' salvation."

Now Persimmon Sneed had argued the plan of atonement on every possible basis known to his extremely limited polemical outlook, and could agree with none. If any sect of eclectics had been within his reach, he would most joyfully have cast his spiritual fortunes with them, for he felt himself better than very many conspicuous Christians; and as he would have joyed in a pose of sanctity, the reproach of being a member of no church touched him deeply.

"I ain't no ransomed saint, I know," he vociferated, — "I ain't no ransomed saint! But ef the truth war known, ye ain't got no religion nuther! That leetle duckin' ez ye call 'immersion' jes' diluted the 'riginal sin in ye mighty leetle. Ye air a toler'ble strong toddy o' iniquity yit. That thar water tempered the whiskey ye drink mighty leetle, — mighty leetle!"

The Christian grace of Silas Boyd was put to a stronger test than it might have been deemed capable of sustaining. But Sneed was a far older man, and as nothing short of breaking his stiff neck might suffice to tame him, Silas Boyd summoned his self-control, and held his tingling hands, and gave himself only to retort.

"I would n't take that off'n ye, Mr. Sneed, 'ceptin' I be a perfessin' member, an' pity them ez is still in the wiles an' delusions o' Satan."

What might have ensued in the nature of

counterthrust, as Persimmon Sneed heard himself called by inference an object of pity, the subsidiary group were spared from learning, for at that moment the sound of steps heralded an approach, and Ben Hanway came into the circle, and sought to claim the attention of the party, inviting them to dine and pass the nooning hour at his house. His countenance was adjusted to the smile of hospitality, but it wore the expression like a mask, and he seemed ill at ease. He had been contending all the morning with Narcissa's freakishness, which he thought intensified by the presence of the valley man, who was returning the civility of that ill-omened visit, and who, by reason of the abnormal excitements of the day, had been received with scant formality, and was already upon the footing of a familiar friend. Selwyn stood smilingly in the way hard by, speaking to those of the men as they passed who gave his presence the meed of a start and a stare of blank surprise, or a curt nod. Narcissa lingered in the background, beneath a great oak; her chin was a little lifted with a touch of displeasure; the eyelids drooped over her brown eyes; her hands, with her wonted careless gesture and with a certain mechanical effort to dispel embarrassment, were raised to the curtain of her white sunbonnet, and spread its folds wingwise behind

her auburn hair. Sundry acquaintances among the honorary attendants paused to greet her pleasantly as they passed, but old Sneed's disapprobation of a woman's appearance on so public an occasion was plainly expressed on his features. For all the Turks are not in Turkey. She followed with frowning, disaffected eyes the procession of men and horses and dogs and colts wending up to the invisible house hidden amongst the full-leaved autumn woods.

"Well, that 's the jury of view; and what do you think of them?" asked Selwyn, watching too, but smilingly, the cavalcade.

"Some similar ter the cor'ner's jury. But *they* hed suthin' ter look tormented an' tribulated 'bout," said the girl, evidently disappointed to find the jury of view not more cheerful of aspect. "But mebbe conversin' a passel by the way with old Persimmon Sneed is powerful depressin' ter the sperits."

Selwyn's face grew grave at the mention of the coroner's jury.

"I 'm afraid that poor fellow missed something good," he said.

Still holding out her sunbonnet in wide distention, she slowly set forth along the path, not even turning back, for sheer perversity, as she saw Ben look anxiously over his shoulder to descry if she followed in the distance.

"Thar ain't much good in life nohow. Things seem set contrariwise." Then, after a moment, and turning her eyes upon him, for she had an almost personal interest in the man whose tragic fate she had first of all discovered, "What sorter good thing did he miss?" she asked, as she settled her sunbonnet soberly on her head.

"Well" — Selwyn began; then he hesitated. He had spoken rather than thought, for he thought little, and he was not used to keeping secrets. Moreover, despite his courageous disbelief in his coming fate, he must have had some yearnings for sympathy; the iron of his exile surely entered his soul at times. The girl, so delicately framed, so flower-like of face, seemed alien to her rude surroundings and the burly, heavy, matter-of-fact folk about her. Her spirituelle presence did away in a measure with the realization of her limitations, her ignorance, and the uncouth surroundings. Even her dress seemed to him hardly amiss, for there then reigned a fleeting metropolitan fashion of straight full flowing skirts and short waists and closely fitting sleeves, — a straining after picture-like effects which Narcissa's attire accomplished without conscious effort, the costume of the mountain women for a hundred years or more. The sunbonnet itself was but the defensive appurtenance of many a Southern city girl,

when a-summering in the country, who esteems herself the possessor of a remarkably beautiful complexion, and heroically proposes to conserve it. Unlike the men, Narcissa's personality did not suggest the distance between them in sophistication, in culture, in refinement, in the small matters of external polish. She seemed not so far from his world, and it was long since he had walked fraternally by the side of some fair girl, and talked freely of himself, his views, his plans, his vagaries, as men, when very young, are wont to do, and as they rarely talk to one another. He had so sedulously sought to content himself with the conditions of his closing existence that the process of reconciling the habit of better things was lost in simple acceptance. He was still young, and the sun shone, and the air was clear and pure and soft, and he walked by the side of a girl, fair and good and not altogether unwise, and he was happy in the blessings vouchsafed.

After a moment he replied: "Well, I thought he might have made a lot of money. I thought I might go partners with him. I had written to him."

Her face did not change; it was still grave and solicitous within the white frame of her sunbonnet, but its expression did not deepen. She did not pity the dead man because he died

without the money he had had a chance to make. She evidently had not even scant knowledge of that most absorbing passion, the love of gain, and she did not value money.

"Somehow whenst folks dies by accident, it 'pears ter me a mistake — somehows — ez ef they war choused out'n time what war laid off fur them an' their'n by right." Evidently she did not lack sensibility.

"Yes," he rejoined, "and you know money makes a lot of difference in people's lives there in the valley towns. Lord knows, 't would in mine."

He swung his riding-whip dejectedly to and fro in his hand as he spoke, and she pushed back her sunbonnet to look seriously at him. He was a miracle of elegance in her estimation, but the fawn-colored suit which he wore owed its nattiness rather to his own symmetry than the cut or the cloth, and he had worn it a year ago. His immaculate linen, somewhat flabby, — for the mountain laundress is averse to starch, — had been delicately trimmed by a deft pair of scissors around the raveling edges of the cuffs and collar, and showed rather what it had been than what it was. His straw hat was pushed a trifle back from his face, in which the sunburn and the inward fire competed to lay on the tints. She did not see how nor what he lacked. Still,

if he wanted it, she pitied him that he did not have it.

"Waal, can't you-uns make it, the same way?"

She asked this sympathetically. She was beginning to experience a certain self-reproach in regard to him, and it gave her unwonted gentleness. She felt that she had been too quick to suspect. Since Ben's report of the reconnoitring interview on which she had sent him in Con Hite's interest, she had dismissed the idea that Selwyn was in aught concerned with the traveler's sudden and violent death; and she did not incline easily to the substituted suspicion that the dead man was a "revenuer," and that Selwyn had written to him to recommend the investigation of Con Hite, whose implication in moonshining he had some cause to divine.

Narcissa had marked with displeasure Ben's surly manner to the valley man, connecting it with these considerations, and never dreaming that it was her acquaintance which her brother grudged the stranger.

"I ought never ter hev set Ben after him," she thought ruefully. "He 'll hang on ter him like a bulldog." But aloud she only said, "You kin make the money all the same."

"Oh, I 'll try, like a little man!" he exclaimed, rousing himself to renewed hope. "I have writ-

ten to another scientific fellow, and he has promised to come and investigate. I hope to Heaven he won't break his neck, too."

She also marked the word "investigate," which had so smitten Ben's attention, and marveled what matter it might be in the mountains worth investigating, and promissory of gain, if not the still-hunt, as it were, of the wily moonshiners. But yet her faith in Selwyn's motives and good will, so suddenly adopted, held fast.

"Con Hite mus' l'arn ter look out fur hisse'f," she thought fretfully, for she could not discern into what disastrous swirl she might be guiding events as she took the helm. "He 's big enough, the Lord knows."

The little log cabin on the slope of the ascent had come into sight. They had followed but slowly; the horses were already tethered to the rails of the fence, and the jury of view and its escort had disappeared within. A very spirited fracas was in progress between the visiting dogs and the inhospitable home canines, and once Ben appeared in the passageway and hoarsely called his hounds off.

"I ain't a-goin' ter hurry," Narcissa remarked cavalierly. "Let Ben an' aunt Minervy dish up an' wait on 'em. They won't miss me. Thar 's nuthin' in this worl' a gormandizin' man kin miss at meal-times, — 'ceptin' teeth."

Selwyn made no comment on this touch of reprisal in Narcissa's manner. If old Persimmon Sneed had deemed her coming forth to meet them superfluous, she in her own good judgment could deem her presence at table an empty show.

"I ain't a-goin' in," she continued. "Ye kin go," she added, with a hasty afterthought. "Thar 's a cheer sot ter the table fur you-uns. I 'm goin' ter bide hyar. They 'll git done arter a while."

She sat languidly down on a step of a stile that went over the fence at a considerable distance from the house, and Selwyn, protesting that he wanted no dinner, established himself on the protruding roots of a great beech-tree that, like gigantic, knuckled, gnarled fingers, visibly took a great grasp of the earth before sinking their tips far out of sight beneath. The shade was dense; the sound of water trickling into the rude horse-trough on the opposite side of the path that was to be a road was delicious in its cool suggestion, for the landscape, far, far to see, blazed as with the refulgence of a summer sun. The odor of the apple orchard, heavily fruited, was mellow on the air, and the red-freighted boughs of an old winesap bent above the girl's head as she sat with her elbow on her knee and her chin in her hand. She gazed dreamily away at those vividly blue ranges,

whither one might fancy summer had fled, so little affinity had their aspect with the network of intermediate brown valleys, and nearer garnet slopes, and the red and yellow oak boughs close at hand, hanging above the precipice and limiting the outlook.

"Yes," he said, after a moment's cogitation, while he absently turned a cluster of beech-nuts in his hands, "I 'll try it, for keeps, you may bet, — if you were a betting character. There 's lots of good things going in these mountains; that is, if a fellow had the money to get 'em out."

He looked up a trifle drearily from under the brim of his straw hat at the smiling summertide of those blue mountains yonder. Oh, fair and feigning prospect, what wide and alluring perspectives! He drew a long sigh. Is it better to know so surely that winter is a-coming?

"An' the sense, too," remarked Narcissa, her eyes still dreamily dwelling on the distance.

He roused himself. The unconsciously flattering inference was too slight not to be lawfully appropriated.

"Yes, the sense and the enterprise. Now, these mountaineers," — he spoke as if she had no part among them, forgetting it, indeed, for the moment, — "they let marble and silver and iron, and gold too, all sorts of natural wealth,

millions and millions of the finest hard-wood timber, lie here undeveloped, without making the least effort to realize on it, without lifting a finger. They have got no enterprise in the world, and they are the most dilatory, slowest gang I ever ran across in my life."

A dimple deepened in the soft fairness of her cheek under the white sunbonnet.

"They got enterprise enough ter want a road," she drawled, fixing her eyes upon him for a moment, then reverting to her former outlook.

He was a trifle embarrassed, and lost his balance.

"Oh, *I*'ll want a road, too, after a while," he returned. "All in good time." He laughed as if to himself, a touch of mystery in his tone, and he took off his hat and jauntily fanned himself.

"Sorter dil'tory yerse'f now; 'pears ter be a ketchin' complaint, like the measles."

Perhaps she secretly resented the reflection on the mountaineers, for there was a certain bellicose intention in her eye, a disposition to push him to his last defenses.

"No; but a body would think a fellow might get enough intelligent coöperation in any promising matter from right around here without corresponding all over the country. And the mountaineers don't know anything, and they don't want to learn anything. Now," convin-

cingly, "what would any of those fellows in there say if I should tell them that I could take a match" — he pulled a handful of lucifers from his pocket — "and set a spring afire?"

She gazed at him in dumb surprise.

"They 'd say I was lying, I reckon," he hazarded. With an ebullition of laughter, he hastily scrambled to his feet and unhitched his horse; then, as he put his foot in the stirrup, he paused and added, "Or else, 'Better leave it be, sonny,'" with the effrontery of mimicry. "'Mought set the mounting afire.'"

He forthwith swung himself into the saddle, and, with a jaunty wave of the hand in adieu, fared forth homeward, leaving her staring after him in wide-eyed amazement.

VII.

The love of contention served, in the case of old Persimmon Sneed, in the stead of industry, of rectitude, of perseverance, of judgment, of every quality that should adorn a man. So eager was he to be off and at the road again that he could scarcely wait to swallow his refection. All the charms of the profusely spread board had not availed to decoy him from the subject, and the repast of the devoted jury of view was seasoned with his sage advice and vehement argument against the project, which

its advocates, fully occupied, failed for the nonce to combat. Now and again Mrs. Minerva Slade sought to interpose in their behalf, and many a tempting trencher was thrust to his elbow to divert the tenor of his discourse. But despite his youthful vulnerability to the dainty which had won him his sobriquet, Persimmon Sneed's palate was not more susceptible to the allurements of flattery than his hard head or his obdurate heart. There was, however, at intervals, a lively clatter of his knife and fork, and some redoubtable activity on the part of his store teeth, frankly false, and without doubt the only false thing about him. Then he hustled up the jury of view and their *confrères* to the resumption of their duties, and was the first man to put foot in stirrup. Certain other mountaineers would fain have lingered, as was manifest by the triangular slices of "apple custard pie" in their hands, as they stood, still munching, on the porch, watching the departing jury of view with their active and aged precursor, and by their loitering farewells and thanks to Aunt Minerva Slade. A beaming countenance did she wear this day. She had cooked to some cheerful purpose. Not one failure had marred the *menu*, in testimony of which, as she afterward remarked, "I never seen scraps so skimpy." Her spectacles reflected the bland light of the day as

smilingly as the eyes above which they were poised, as she stood in the doorway, and with fluttering graciousness received the homage of her beneficiaries.

"That youngest one, Con Hite, was sorter mild-mannered an' meek," she afterward said, often recounting the culinary triumphs of the great day, "an' I misdoubts but he hed the deespepsy, fur he war the only one ez did n't pitch in an' eat like he war tryin' to pervide fur a week's fastin'. I reckon they all knowed what sort'n pitiful table they sets out at Mis' Cornely Hood's, t'other side the mounting, whar they expected ter stop fur supper, an' war a-goin' ter lay up suthin' agin destitution."

For an hour, perhaps, before reaching Hanway's, Con Hite had ridden with the jury of view. He had not much expectation of influencing the fate of the road in any respect by his presence, but he felt it was a matter of consistency to appear with the others of the opposition. He desired, too, to publicly urge, as his reason for objecting to the project, the insufficiency of hands in so sparsely populated a region to make a road and keep it in repair; lest another reason, the wish to preserve the seclusion so dear to the moonshiner, be attributed to him. This matter of policy had been made very palatable by the probability that he would see

Narcissa, and it was with a deep disappointment that he beheld Selwyn beside her, and received only a slight movement of her drooping eyelids as a token of recognition and welcome. He had been minded to dismount and walk with her, but his heart burned with resentment. Of what worth now were all his buoyant anticipations, while she was listening to the sugared flatteries of the "town cuss"? He had this subject for cogitation, while, in a stifling room, he was regaled with hard cider and apple-jack by no more fascinating Hebe than old Mrs. Slade, with her withered sallow skin, her excited, anxious eye, her fluttered, tremulous, skinny fingers, her hysteric cap with its maddeningly flying strings, and her wonderfully swift venerable scamper in and out of the kitchen.

Con Hite was the last to go. He led his horse down to the watering-trough, oblivious of the stream, with its ample supply, a hundred yards or so further on and in full view; and as he stood there, with his hand on the animal's shoulder, he turned his eyes, somewhat wistful, though wont to be so bold and bright, upon Narcissa, still seated on the stile. Her own brown long-lashed eyes had a far-away look in them. They evidently passed him over absently, and followed the squad of men swiftly trotting adown the road, all in good heart and good

temper again, to take up their duty where they had laid it down. No faint vestige of a dimple was now in her daintily white cheek.

"Ye be powerful sparin' o' speech ter-day," he remarked.

Her eyes did not move from the distant landscape. "Folks ez hev got nuthin' ter say would do well ter say it."

He flushed. "Ye hed mo' ter say ter the stranger-man."

"Don't see him so powerful frequent. When a thing is sca'ce, it 's apt ter be ch'ice," she retorted.

She experienced a certain satisfaction in her acridity. For his sake, lest suspicion befall him, she had sought to inaugurate an investigation — nay, a persecution — of this man, and he a stranger; and but that circumstance was kind to him, her effort might have resulted cruelly. And now that she had done so much for Con Hite, it was her pleasure to take it out on him, as the phrase goes. All unaware of this curious mental attitude, he winced under her satire.

"Waal, I kin make myself sca'ce, too," he said, an impulse of pride surging in his heart.

"It mought be better fur ye," she replied indifferently.

His momentary independence left him suddenly.

"Narcissa," he said reproachfully, "ye did n't always talk this way ter me."

"That ain't news ter me. Ben 'lows ez I talk six ways fur Sunday."

"Ye dunno how I feel, not knowin' how ye be set towards me, an' hevin' ter see ye so seldom, a-workin' all the time down yander, a-moonshinin' "—

"I would n't talk 'bout it so turr'ble loud." She glanced apprehensively over her shoulder. "An' ye 'd better quit it, ennyhows."

"Ye 'lows it be wrong," he said, his bold bright eyes all softened as he looked at her, "bein' agin the law?"

"I ain't keerin' fur the law. Ef the truth war knowed, the law is aimin' ter git all the benefit o' whiskey bein' drunk itself. That 's whar the law kems in. I only keer fur"— She stopped abruptly. She had nearly revealed to him that she cared only lest some disaster come to him in his risky occupation; that she would like him to be ploughing in a safe level field at the side of a cabin, where she might sit by the window and sew, and look out and see that no harm befell this big bold man, six feet two inches high. "Con Hite!" she exclaimed, her face scarlet, "I never see a body ez hard-hearted an' onmerciful ez ye air. Why n't ye water that sufferin' beast, ez air fairly honing

ter drink? Waal," she continued, after a pause in which he demonstrated the axiom that one may lead a horse to water, but cannot make him drink, "then why n't ye go? I ain't got time ter waste, ef ye hev."

She rose as if for departure, and he put his foot in the stirrup. "I wish ye would n't be so harsh ter me, Narcissa," he said meekly.

"Waal, thar be a heap o' saaft-spoken gals ter be hed fur the askin'. Ye kin take yer ch'ice."

And with this he was fain to be content, as he mounted and rode reluctantly away.

She sat down again, and was still for a long time after the last echo of his horse's hoofs had died on the air. Her thoughts did not follow him, however. They turned again with renewed interest to the fair-haired young stranger. Somehow she was ill at ease and vaguely disillusioned. She watched mechanically, and with some unaccustomed touch of melancholy, the burnished shimmering golden haze gradually invest far blue domes and their purple slopes, and the brown valleys, and the rugged rocky mountains nearer, with a certain idealized slumberous effect like the landscape of a dream. In these still spaces naught moved now save the imperceptible lengthening of the shadows. It had never occurred to her to deem the scene

beautiful; it was the familiar furniture of her home. Upon this her eyes had first opened. She had never thought to compare it to aught else, — to the suffocating experience of one visit to the metropolitan glories of the little town in the flat woods known as Colbury. It had seemed, indeed, magnificent to her ignorance, and the temerity of the architecture of a two-story house had struck her aghast. She had done naught but wonder and stare. The trip had been a great delight, but she had never desired to linger or to dwell there. Certain sordid effects came over her; reminiscences of the muddy streets, the tawdry shops, the jostling, busy-eyed people.

"Ain't this ez good?" she said to herself, as the vast scene suddenly fluctuated beneath a flare of wind amidst the sunshine, and light, detached white flakes of cloud went winging athwart the blue sky; their shadows followed them fast across the sunlit valley, — only their dark and lifeless semblances, like the verbal forms of some white illumined thought that can find no fit expression in words. The breath of the pines came to her, the sound of the water, the sudden fanfare of the unseen wind in the sky heralding the clouds. "Ain't this ez good?" she said again, with that first deadly, subtle distrust of the things of home, that insid-

ious discontent so fatal to peace. He evidently did not deem it as good, and the obvious fact rankled in her. The mountain men, and their lack of enterprise, and their drawling speech which he had mimicked, — they too shared his disparagement; and she was conscious that she herself did not now think so well of them, — so conscious that she made a loyal struggle against this sentiment.

"So shif'less, so thrif'less," she echoed his words. "An' I dunno ez *I* ever viewed a waste-fuller critter 'n this hyar very Mister Man." She stooped down, gathering together the handful of matches that Selwyn had inadvertently pulled from his pocket with the one which he had used in illustrating his suggestion of setting the waters of a spring afire. "Ef he keeps on ez wasteful ez this, he 'll get out o' matches whar he lives over yander; an' I misdoubts ef, smart ez he 'lows he be, he could kindle the wood ter cook his breakfus' by a flint rock, — ef he air so boastful ez ter 'low ez he kin set spring water afire."

She made the matches into a compact little budget and slipped them into her pocket, and as she rose and looked about uncertainly, she heard her aunt Minerva calling to her from the house that it was high time to go and drive up the cows.

Aunt Minerva had not bethought herself to summon the girl to dinner. The whole world seemed surfeited to her, so had dinner occupied her day. Narcissa herself, under the stress of the abnormal excitements, felt no lack as she slowly trod the familiar paths in search of the bovine vagrants.

Her thoughts bore her company, and she was far from home when the aspect of the reddening sun smote her senses. She stood and watched the last segment of the vermilion sphere sink down out of sight, and, as she turned, the October dusk greeted her on every side. The shadows, how dense in the woods; the valleys, darkling already! Only on the higher eastern slopes a certain red reflection spoke of the vanishing day. She looked vainly as yet for some faint silvery suffusion which might herald the rising of the moon; for it was to be a bright night. She was glad of the recollection. She had not hitherto realized it, but she was tired. She would rest for a little while, and thus refreshed she would be the sooner home. She sat down on a ledge of the outcropping rock and looked about her. The spot was unfamiliar, but in the far stretch of the darkening scene she identified many a well-known landmark. There was the gleaming bend of the river in the valley, lost presently amidst the foliage of its

banks; and here was an isolated conical peak on a far lower level than the summit of the range, and known as Thimble Mountain; and nearer still, across a narrow bight of the Cove, was a bare slope. As she glanced at it she half rose from her place, for there was the witch-face, twilight on the grim features, yet with the aid of memory so definitely discerned that they could hardly have been more distinct by noonday, — a face of inexplicably sinister omen. "Oh, why did I see it to-day!" she exclaimed, the presage of ill fortune strong upon her, with that grisly mask leering at her from across the valley. But the day was well-nigh gone; only a scant space remained in which to work the evil intent of fate. She seated herself anew, for in the shadowy labyrinth of the woods her path could scarcely be found. She must needs wait for the moon.

She wondered, as she sat and gazed about, how far she might be from that new dwelling where he lived who so scorned the mountain, and who owed to it his every breath. There was no sound, no suggestion of human habitation. The shadowy woods stood dense about the little open ledgy space on three sides; toward the very verge of the mountain the rocks grew shelving and precipitous, and beyond the furthest which she could see, the gray edge of

which cut sharply against the base of a distant dun-tinted range, she knew the descent was abrupt to the depths of the valley. Looking up, she beheld the trembling lucid whiteness of a star; now and again the great rustling boughs of an oak-tree swayed beneath it, and then its glister was broken and deflected amidst the crisp autumnal leaves, but still she saw it shine. It told, too, that there was water near; she caught its radiant multiplied reflection, like a cluster of scintillating white gems, on the lustrous dark surface of a tiny pool, circular and rock-bound, close beneath the ledge on which she sat. She leaned over, and saw in its depths the limpid fading red sky, and the jagged brown border of the rocks, and a grotesque moving head, which she recognized, after a plunge of the heart, as her own sunbonnet. She drew back in dismay; she would have no more of this weird mirror of the rocks and woods, and looked up again at the shining of the star amidst the darkening shadows of the scarlet oak. How tall that tree was, how broad of girth! And how curiously this stranger talked! What was there to do with all these trees! Would he cut down all the trees on the mountain? A sudden doubt of his sanity crossed her mind. It was the first, and her heart stood still for a moment. But as she

slowly canvassed the idea, it accounted for much otherwise impossible to comprehend: his evident poverty and his efforts toward the purchase of lands; his illness and his bluff insistence on his strength; his wild talk of enterprise and his mysterious intimations of phenomenal opportunities. Confirmations of the suspicion crowded upon her; above all, the mad boast that with a match he could set the waters of a spring afire.

With a sad smile at the fatuity of the thing, in her idle waiting she drew one of his matches from her pocket; then she struck it briskly on the rugged rock, and cast it, blazing lightly, into the bubbling waters of the spring.

The woods, the rocks, the black night, the fleering, flouting witch-face, all with an abrupt bound sprang into sudden visibility. A pyramid of yellow flame was surging up from the bubbling surface of the water. Long, dark, slim shadows were speeding through the woods, with strange slants of yellow light; the very skies were a-flicker. She cowered back for a moment, covering her face with her hands. Then, affrighted at her own sorceries, she fled like a deer through the wilderness.

VIII.

One by one, as the afternoon wore on, the spectators began to desert the jury of view, their progress over the mountain being slower than had been anticipated. So often, indeed, did insoluble difficulties arise touching the location of the road and questions of dispute that it might be wondered that the whole body did not perish by faction. After the party had passed the boundary line of Persimmon Sneed's tract, where he seemed to consider the right of eminent domain merged in nothingness in comparison to his lordly prerogatives as owner in fee simple, he ceased to urge as heretofore. He dictated boldly to the jury. He rode briskly on in advance, as if doing the honors of his estate to flattered guests, now and again waving his hand to illustrate his proposition, his keen, high-pitched voice overcoming in its distinct utterance the sound of hoofs and spurs, and the monotonous bass contradictions proffered by Silas Boyd.

And the jury of view, silent and circumspect, rode discreetly on.

Persimmon Sneed's mare seemed as fresh as himself, and when he would turn, as he often did, to face the fatigued, wilted, overwhelmed jury jogging along on their jaded steeds, tired

out with the long day's jaunt and the rough footing, the mare would move swiftly backward in a manner that would have done credit to the manege of a circus. And at this extreme advantage Persimmon Sneed and his raised adjuring forefinger seemed impossible to be gainsaid. His arguments partook of the same unanswerable character.

"Ye don't see none o' my cattle, do ye?" He waved his hand toward the woods flecked with the long slantings of the sun. "I hev got more 'n a hunderd head grazin' right hyar in the bresh. Cattle-thieves could call an' salt 'em easy enough, but they could n't drive 'em off through the laur'l thar; it's thick ez hell!" pointing to the dense jungle. "But ef we-uns hed this hyar road what ye air aimin' ter lay off, why, a leetle salt an' a leetle drivin' an' a moonlight night would gather 'em, an' the whole herd would be in Georgy by daybreak. I would n't hev the hawn of a muley cow lef'. Now, ez it be, them cattle air ez safe from sight ez ef I hed swallowed 'em!" And he whirled again, and led the column.

The jury of view rode disconsolately on.

They experienced a temporary relief when they had passed the confines of his tract, — for it was across but a protruding tongue of the main body of his land that the road was ex-

pected to run, — and entered upon the domain of the "valley man with the lung complaint;" for this diverted Persimmon Sneed to the more amiable task of narrating how the stranger had sought to buy land of him, and the high prices he had scornfully refused, the adaptability of his land to his own especial needs being so phenomenally apt.

A sudden query from Silas Boyd rendered their respite short: "What 's that man Selwyn want so much land fur, ennyhows? He hev been tryin' ter buy all that 'crost the gorge, too." He waved his hand toward the gloomy woods darkening on the opposite slope.

"Ter graze cattle, o' course," promptly surmised Persimmon Sneed. "Jes' look at my fine chance o' yearlin's, a-layin' on fat an' bone an' muscle every day, with no expense nor attendance, an' safe an' sound an' sure. An' now," he cried suddenly, and the shuddering jury saw the collocation of ideas as it bore down upon them, and Persimmon Sneed swiftly turned, facing them, while the mare nimbly essayed a *passado* backward, "ye air talkin' 'bout changin' all this, ruinationin' the vally o' my land ter me. Ye 'low ye want ter permote the interus' o' the public! Waal," raising an impressive forefinger, "ain't *I* the public?"

No one ventured a reply.

The jury of view rode desperately on.

They had presently more cause for depression of spirit. It began to be evident that with the dusk some doubt had arisen in the minds of the mountaineers of the party as to the exact trend of the herder's trail. The doubt intensified, until further progress proved definitively that the indistinct trail was completely lost. Darkness came on apace; the tangled ways of the forest seemed momently more tortuous; wolves were not rare in the vicinity; rumors of a gang of horse-thieves were rife.

After much discussion, the jury of view agreed that they would go no further at present, but wait for the rising of the moon, on the theory that it would then be practicable to make their way to the Hood cabin, on the other side of the mountain, which was their immediate goal, and which they had expected to reach by sunset; unaware that in their devious turnings they had retraced several miles of their course, and were now much nearer Selwyn's dwelling in the woods than the terminus of their route.

Despite their uncertainty and anxiety, the rest was grateful. The shades of night were cool and refreshing after the glare of the day, as they sat smoking on the rocks about the verge of the mountain. The horses had been unsaddled, and were picketed in an open glade at

a little distance: in recurrent pauses in the talk, the sound of their grazing on the scanty grass came to the ear; all else was silence save the tinkling of a mountain rill, — a keen detached appoggiatura rising occasionally above the monody of its murmurous flow, — and the melancholy chiming of some lingering cicada, the latest spared of the frost.

The night was as yet very dark; the stars were dull in a haze, the valley was a vague blur; even the faces of the men could not be dimly distinguished. Strange, then, that an added visibility suddenly invested the woods and the sky-line beyond a dense belt of timber.

"'Pears ter me toler'ble early fur the moon," observed one of the men. "She 's on the wane now, too."

"'T ain't early, though," replied the sullen bass voice of Silas Boyd from the darkness; it was lowered, that the others might not hear. "That thar old perverted Philistine of a Persimmon Sneed kep' us danderin' roun' hyar till mighty nigh eight o'clock, I 'll bet, a-persistin' an' a-persistin' he knowed the road, when he war plumb lost time we got on that cowpath. An' the jury o' view, they hed ter take Persimmon Sneed's advice, he bein' the oldest, an' wait *hyar* fur the risin' moon. Persimmon Sneed will repent he picked out this spot, — he 'll repent it sure!"

This dictum was only the redundancy of discontent; but when, in the light of subsequent events, it was remembered, and special gifts of discernment were attributed to Silas Boyd, he did not disclaim them, for he felt that his words were surely inspired by some presentiment, so apt were they, and so swiftly did the fulfillment follow the prophecy.

There was a sudden stir among the group. The men were getting quickly to their feet, alert, tense, with broken whispers and bated breath. For there, on a bare slope, viewed diagonally across the gorge and illumined with a wavering pallor, the witch-face glared down at them from the dense darkness of the woods. The quick chilly repulsion of the strangers as they gazed spellbound at the apparition was outmatched by the horror of those who had known the fantasy from childhood; — never thus had they beheld the gaunt old face! What strange unhallowed mystery was this, that it should smile and grimace and mock at them from out the shadowy night, with flickers of light as of laughter running athwart its grisly lineaments? What evil might it portend? They all stood aghast, watching this pallid emblazonment of the deep night.

"Boys," said old Dent Kirby tremulously, "thar 's suthin' powerful cur'ous 'bout this 'spe-

riunce. That thar light war never kindled in heaven or yearth."

"Let 's go!" cried Jeremiah Sayres. "We hev got ter git out'n this somehows."

"Go whar?" croaked Silas Boyd, his deep bass voice lowered to a whisper. "I be 'feard ter quit the trail furder. 'Pinnock's Mis'ry' be hyar-abouts somewhar, a plumb quicksand, what a man got into an' floundered an' sank, an' floundered agin, an' whenst they fund him his hair war white an' his mind deranged. Or else we-uns mought run off'n a bluff somewhar, an' git our necks bruk."

Now Persimmon Sneed was possessed of a most intrusive curiosity, and he was further endowed with a sturdy courage.

"I 'll jes' step off a leetle way to'des that light, an' view whar it kems from," he observed coolly. "The woods air too wet to burn."

He would not listen to protest.

"The witch-face ain't never blighted me none," he rejoined stoutly as he set forth.

IX.

The thick tangled mass of the undergrowth presently intervened, so that, as he broke his way through it, he wondered that its bosky dimness should be so visible beneath the heavy shadows of the great trees looming high over-

head. Once he stopped dubiously; the glow evidently came rather from below than above. It is too much to say that a thrill of fear tried the fibres of Persimmon Sneed's obdurate old heart. But he listened for a moment to hear, perchance, the sound of voices from the group he had left, or the champing of the picketed steeds. He was an active man, and had come fast and far since quitting his companions. Not even a vague murmur rose from the silent autumnal woods. The stillness was absolute. As he moved forward once more, the impact of his foot upon the rain-soaked leaves, the rustle of the boughs as he pressed among them, the rise and fall of his own breathing, somewhat quicker than its wont, served to render appreciable to Persimmon Sneed the fact that he possessed nerves which were more susceptible to a quaver of doubt than that redoubtable endowment called his hard head.

"Somebody hev jes' sot out fire in the woods, — though powerful wet," he muttered, his intellectual entity seeking to quiet that inward flutter of his mere bodily being. "But I 'm a-goin' on," he protested obstinately, "ef it be bodaciously kindled by the devil!"

And as he spoke, his heart failed, his limbs seemed sinking beneath him, his pulses beat tumultuously for a moment, and then were

abruptly still; he had emerged from the woods in a great flickering glare which pervaded an open, rocky space shelving to a precipice, and beheld a tall, glowing yellow flame rising unquenched from the illuminated surface of a bubbling mountain spring. His senses reeled; a myriad of tawny red and yellow flashes swayed before his dazzled eyes. He had heard all his life of the wild freaks of the witches in the woods. Had he chanced on their unhallowed pastimes in the solitudes of these untrodden mountain wildernesses? Was this miraculous fire, blazing from the depths of the clear water, necromancy, the work of the devil?

The next moment his heart gave a great throb. He found his voice in a wild halloo. Among the fluttering shadows of the trees he had caught sight of the figure of a man, and, a thousand times better, of a face that he knew. The man was approaching the fire, with a stare of blank amazement and fear as his distended eyes beheld the phenomenon of the blazing spring. Their expression changed instantly upon the sound. His face was all at once alert, grave, suspicious, a prosaic anxiety obliterating every trace of superstitious terror. His right hand was laid upon his hip in close proximity to a pistol-pocket, and Persimmon Sneed remembered suddenly that his own pistol was in

its holster on his saddle, he could not say how far distant in these wild, trackless woods, and that this man was a notorious offender against the law, sundry warrants for his arrest for horse-stealing having been issued at divers times and places. There had been much talk of an organized band who had assisted in these and similar exploits in secluded districts of the county, but Persimmon Sneed had given it scant credence until he beheld several armed men lagging in the rear, their amazed, uncouth faces, under their broad-brimmed hats, all weird and unnatural in the pervasive yellow glow. They had, evidently, been led to the spot by the strange flare in the heart of the woods; but Nick Peters could well enough pretermit his surprise and whatever spiritual terrors might assail him till a more convenient season for their indulgence. A more immediate danger menaced him than the bodily appearance of the devil, which he had momently expected as he gazed at the flaming water. He had seen the others of his own party approaching, and he walked quickly across the clear space to Persimmon Sneed. He was a little, slim, wiry man, with light, sleek hair, pink cheeks, high cheek-bones, and a bony but blunt nose. He had a light eye, gray, shallow, but inscrutable, and there was something feline in his aspect

and glance, at once smooth and caressing and of latent fierceness.

"Why, Mr. Persimmon Sneed," he exclaimed in a voice as bland as a summer's day, "how did you-uns an' yer frien's do sech ez that?" and he pointed at the flaring pyramid on the surface of the water.

Persimmon Sneed, in his proclivity to argument, forgot his lack of a pistol and his difficult position, unarmed and alone.

"I 'll hev ye ter remember I hev no dealin's with the devil. I dunno how that water war set afire, nor my friends nuther," he said stiffly.

"Whar air they?"

Nick Peters's keen, discerning eye had been covertly scanning the flickering shadows and the fluctuating slants of yellow light about them. Now he boldly threw his glance over his shoulder.

Persimmon Sneed caught himself sharply.

"They ain't hyar-abouts," he said gruffly, on his guard once more.

A look of apprehension crossed the horse-thief's face. The denial was in the nature of an affirmation to his alert suspicion; for it is one of the woes of the wicked that, knowing no truth themselves, they cannot recognize it in others, even in a transient way, as a chance acquaintance. He must needs have heed. A number of men,

doubtless, well armed, were in the immediate vicinity. As he whirled himself lightly half around on his spurred heel, his manner did not conform to his look.

"Did you-uns an' them kem all the way from the valley ter view the blazin' spring?" he asked. "Looks some like hell-fire," he added incidentally, and with the tone of one familiar with the resemblance he descried.

"Naw; we-uns never hearn on it afore; I jes' run on it accidental," Sneed replied succinctly, hardly daring to trust himself to an unnecessary word; for the staring men that had gathered at a respectful distance about the blazing spring numbered nine or ten, and an ill-advised tongue might precipitate an immediate attack on the dismounted, unarmed group awaiting his return at the verge of the bluff. A genuine thrill of terror shook him as he realized that at any moment he might be followed by men as ill prepared as he to cope with the horse-thief's gang.

"I see ye rid," said Nick Peters, observing his acquaintance's spurs. "Yer frien's rid, too, I s'pose?"

Persimmon Sneed, desirous of seeming unsuspicious, merely nodded. He seemed as suspicious, in fact, as watchful, as stanch, as ready to spring, as a leopard in a cage. His thin lips

were set, his alert eyes keen, his unshaven, stubbly jaws rigid, his whole body at a high tension. The man of quicker perceptions was first to drop the transparent feint, but only to assume another.

"Now, Mr. Sneed," he said, with an air of reproach and upbraiding, "do ye mean ter tell me ez ye hev kem up hyar with the sheriff or dep'ty ter nose me out; me, who hev got no home, — folks burned my house ter the yearth, namin' *me* 'horse-thief' an' sech, — nor frien's, nor means, nor havin's, plumb run ter groun' like a fox or sech?"

"Ef ye did" — said a gigantic ruffian who had come up, backed by a shadow twice his size, and stood assisting at the colloquy, looking over the shoulder of his wiry little chief. He left the sentence unfinished, a significant gesture toward the handle of the pistol in his belt rendering the omission of slight moment.

"Some o' them boys war wondering ef that fire out'n the water would burn," observed a fat, greasy, broad-faced lout, with a foolish, brutal grin. "It mought make out ter singe this stranger's hair an' hide, ef we war ter gin him a duckin' thar."

"Air ye a-huntin' of me, too, Mr. Sneed, — ye that war 'quainted with me in the old times on Tomahawk Creek?" Peters reiterated his

demand in a plaintive, melodramatic tone, which titillated his fancy, somehow, and, like virtue, was its own exceeding great reward; for both he and Persimmon Sneed knew right well that their acquaintance amounted only to a mere facial recognition when they had chanced to pass on the country road or the village street, years before. Nevertheless, under the pressure of the inherent persuasiveness of the suggested retribution, Persimmon Sneed made haste to aver that his errand in the mountains was in no sense at the sheriff's instance. And so radical and indubitable were his protestations that Nick Peters was constrained to discard this fear, and demand, "What brung ye ter Witch-Face Mounting then, Mr. Sneed?"

"Waal, some fellows war app'inted by the county court ter view the road an' report on it," said Persimmon, "an' I kem along ter see how it mought affect my interust."

How far away, how long ago, how infinitely unimportant, seemed all those convolutions of trail and argument in which he had expended the finest flowers of his contradictory faculties, the stanch immobility of his obstinacy, his unswerving singleness of purpose in seeing only one side of a question, this afternoon, a few short hours since! The mutability of the affairs of the most immutable of human beings!

This reflection was cut short by observing the stare of blank amazement on Nick Peters's face. "Road!" he said. "Thar ain't no road."

"They air app'inted ter lay out an' report on openin' one," explained Persimmon Sneed.

Evidently Nick Peters's experience of the law was in its criminal rather than in its civil phases, but the surprise died out of his face, and he presently said, with a beguiling air of frankness, "Now, Mr. Sneed, ye see this happens right in my way of trade. Jes' tell me whar them loafers air, an' how many horses they hev got along, an' I 'll gin ye the bes' beastis I hev got ter ride, an' a pair o' shootin'-irons and set ye in the valley road on the way home. Ye kin say ye war lost from them."

It is true that in this moment Persimmon Sneed remembered each of his contumacious comrades, and saw that they outnumbered by one the horse-thief's gang; he realized that they were out of leading-strings, and amply capable of taking care of themselves. He had that wincing terror which an unarmed man experiences at the sight of "shootin'-irons" in the grasp of other and antagonistic men. More than all, he looked at those hell-lighted flames, as he esteemed them, rising out of the lustrous water, and believed the jocose barbarity of the threat of the brutal henchman might be serious earnest in its execution.

But the jury of view and their companions were all unprepared for molestation in such wise as menaced them. He reflected anew upon their dismounted condition, the horses hitched at a distance, the saddles scattered on the ground in the darkness, with the holsters buckled to them and the pistols within. A sudden attack meant a successful robbery and perchance bloodshed.

"I 'll die fust!" he said loudly, and he had never looked more painfully obstinate. "I 'll die fust!" He lifted his quivering hand and shook it passionately in the air. "I ain't no ransomed saint, an' I know it, but afore I 'll betray that thar jury o' view what 's been app'inted by the county court ter lay off the damned road, I 'll die fust! I ain't no ransomed saint, I ain't, but I 'll *die* fust! I ain't no ransomed" —

"Stop, boys, stop!" cried the wiry little horse-thief, as the others gathered about Sneed with threatening eyes and gestures, while he vociferated amongst them, as lordly as if he were in his oft-time preëminence as the foreman of a jury. Nick Peters's face had changed. There was a sudden fear upon it, uncomprehended by Persimmon Sneed. It did not occur to him until long afterward that he had for the first time used the expression "a jury of view," and

that the horse-thief's familiarity with the idea of a jury was only in the sense of twelve men.

Peters spoke aside to the others, only a word or so, but there was amongst them an obvious haste to get away, of which Persimmon Sneed was cognizant, albeit his head was swimming, his breath short, his eyes dazzled by the fire which he feared. His understanding, however, was blunted in some sort, it seemed to him, for he could make no sense of Nick Peters's observation as he took him by the arm, although afterward it became plain enough.

"Ye 'll hev ter go an' 'bide along o' we-uns fur awhile, Mr. Sneed," he said, choking with the laughter of some occult happy thought. "Ye ain't a ransomed saint yit, but ye will be arter awhile, I reckon, ef ye live long enough."

Their shadows skulked away as swiftly as they themselves, even more furtively, running on ahead, in great haste to be gone. The firelight slanted through the woods in quick, elusive fluctuations, ever dimmer, ever recurrently flaring, and when the jury of view and their companions, alarmed by the long absence of Persimmon Sneed, followed the strange light through the woods to the brink of the burning spring, they found naught astir save the vagrant shadows of the great boles of the trees, no longer held to their accustomed orbit, but wandering through the woods with a large freedom.

That this fire, blazing brilliantly on the surface of the clear spring water, was kindled by supernatural power was not for a moment doubted by the mountaineers who had never before heard of such a phenomenon, and the spiriting away of Persimmon Sneed they promptly ascribed to the same agency. With these thoughts upon them, they did not linger long at the spot where he had met so mysterious a fate. Their ringing halloos, with which the woods were enlivened, took on vaguely appalled cadences; the echoes came back to them like mocking shouts; and they were glad enough to ride away at last through the quiet moonlit glades, their faltering voices silent, leaving that mystic fire slowly dying where it had blazed so long on the face of the water.

A more extended search, later, resulting as fruitlessly, the idea that Persimmon Sneed had been in some way lured bodily within the grasp of the devil prevailed among the more ignorant people of the community; they dolorously sought to point the moral how ill the headstrong fare, and speculated gloomily as to the topic on which he had ventured to argue with Satan, who in rage and retaliation had whisked him away. But there was a class of citizens in Colbury who hearkened with elated sentiments to this story

of the burning spring. A company of capitalists was promptly organized, every inch of attainable land on the mountain was quietly bought, and machinery for boring for oil was already at the spring when the news was brought to Selwyn by Hanway, who, not having seen the young stranger for the past week or so, feared he was ill. The flakes of the first snow of the season were whirling past the windows — no more on autumn leaves they looked, no more on far-off bare but azure mountains, feigning summer. The distant ranges were ghostly white. The skeleton woods near at hand were stark and black, and trembled with sudden starts, and strove wildly with the winds, and were held in an inexorable fate, and cried and groaned aloud.

Hanway was right in his surmise, for Selwyn was ill, and lay on the lounge wheeled up to the fire. His cheeks seemed still touched with color, the reflection from the ragged red smoking-jacket which he wore, but a sort of smitten pallid doom was on his brow and in his eyes. His gaze dwelt insistently on the doctor, the tall, thin practitioner of the surrounding country, who had just finished an examination and was slowly returning his spectacles to their case as he stood before the fire. It seemed as if the patient expected him to speak, but he said nothing, and looked down gravely into the red coals.

Then it was that Hanway narrated the sensation of the neighborhood. It roused Selwyn to a frenzy of excitement; his disjointed, despairing exclamations, in annotation, as it were, of the story, disclosed his own discovery of the oil, his endeavors to secure the opinion of an expert as to its value, his efforts to buy up the land, his reasons for opposing the premature opening of a road which might reveal the presence of the oil springs, when the law discriminating in favor of oil works and similar interests would later make the way thither a public thoroughfare at all events. He cried out upon his hard fate, when money might mean life to him; upon the bitter dispensation of the mysterious kindling of those hidden secluded waters to blazon his secret to the world, to enrich others through his discovery which should have made him so rich.

The dry, spare tone of the physician interrupted, — a trite phrase interdicting agitation.

"Why, doctor," said Selwyn, suddenly comprehending, "you think my present wealth will last out my time!"

Once more the physician looked silently into the fire. He had seen a great deal of dying, but he had lived a quiet ascetic life, which made his sensibilities tender, and he did not get used to death. "I wish you would stay with him, if you can," he said to Hanway at the outer door. "It will be a very short time now."

It was even shorter than they thought. The snow, falling then, had not disappeared from the earth when the picks of the grave-diggers cleft through the clods in the secluded little mountain burying-ground. It was easier work than they had anticipated, although the earth was frozen; and the grave was almost prepared when they realized that the ground had been broken before, and that here was the deserted resting-place of the stranger who had come so far to see him. Hanway remembered Selwyn's words, his aversion to the idea that the spot was awaiting him, but the dark November day was closing in, the storm clouds were gathering anew, so they left him there, and this time the grave held its tenant fast.

X.

One day a letter was mailed in Colbury by an unknown hand, addressed to Mrs. Persimmon Sneed and it fared deliberately by way of Sandford Cross-Roads to its destination. It awoke there the wildest excitement and delight, for although it brazenly asserted that Mr. Persimmon Sneed was in the custody of the writer, and that he would be returned safely to his home only upon the payment of one hundred dollars in a mysterious manner described, — otherwise the writer would not answer for consequences, — it

gave assurance that he was alive and well, and might even hope to see friends and home and freedom once more. In vain the sheriff of the county expostulated with Mrs. Sneed, representing that the law was the proper liberator of Persimmon Sneed, and that the payment of money would encourage crime. The contradictory man's wife was ready to commit crime, if necessary, in this cause, and would have cheerfully cracked the bank in Colbury. And certainly this seemed almost unavoidable at one time, for to possess herself of this sum of her husband's hoard his signature was essential. The poor woman, in her limp sunbonnet and best calico dress, clung to the grating of the teller's window, and presented in futile succession her husband's bank-book, his returned checks, and even his brand-new check-book, each with a gush of tears, while the perplexed official remonstrated, and explained, and rejected each persuasion in turn, passing them all back beneath the grating, and alas! keeping the money on his side of those inexorable bars. It seemed to poor Mrs. Sneed that the bank was of opinion that Persimmon corporally was of slight consequence, the institution having the true value of the man on deposit. To accommodate matters, however, and that the poor woman should not be weeping daily and indefinitely on the maddened teller's win-

dow, an intermediary money-lender was found, who, having vainly sought to induce the bank to render itself responsible, then Mrs. Sneed, who had naught of her own, then a number of friends, who deemed the whole enterprise an effort at robbery and seemed to consider Persimmon a good riddance, took heart of grace and made the plunge at a rate of interest which was calculated to cloy his palate forever after. The money forthwith went a roundabout way according to the directions of the letter.

It came to its destination in this wise.

Con Hite's distilling enterprise was on so small a scale that one might have imagined it to be altogether outside the purview of the law, which, it is said, does not take note *de minimis*. One of those grottoes under a beetling cliff, hardly caves, called in the region "rock houses," sufficed to contain the small copper and its appurtenances, himself and his partner and the occasional jolly guest. It was approached from above rather than from below, by a winding way, beside the cliff between great boulders, which was so steep and brambly and impracticable that it was hardly likely to be espied by "revenuers." The rock house opened on space. Beyond the narrow path at its entrance the descent was sheer to the bottom of the gorge below.

In this stronghold, one night, Con Hite sat

gloomy and depressed beside the little copper still for the sake of which he risked so much. It held all it could of singlings, and it seemed to him a cheery sight in the shadowy recesses of the rock house. He regarded it with mingled pride and affection, often declaring it "the smartest still of its capacity in the world." To him it was at once admirable as an object of art and a superior industrial agent.

"An' I dunno why Narcissa be so set agin it," he muttered. "But for it I would n't hev money enough ter git a start in this world. My mother an' she could n't live in the same house whenst we git married." He meditated for a moment, and shook his head in solemn negation, for his mother was constructed much after the pattern of Narcissa herself. "An' *I* would n't live a minit alongside o' Ben Hanway ef I war Nar'sa's husband. Ben would n't let me say my soul 's my own. I be 'bleeged ter mak the money fur a start o' cattle an' sech myse'f, an' hev a house an' home o' my own."

And then he took the pipe from his mouth and sighed. For even his care seemed futile. It was true that the fair-haired young stranger was dead, and he had a pang of self-reproach whenever he thought of his jealousy, as if he had wished him ill. But she had worn a cold white unresponsive face when he had seen her last;

she did not listen to what he said, her mind evidently elsewhere. She looked at him as if she did not see him. She did not think of him. He was sure that this was not caprice. It was some deep absorbing feeling in which he had no share.

The moon, like some fair presence, looked in at the broad portal. Outside, the white tissues of her misty diaphanous draperies trailed along the dark mountain slopes beneath the dim stars as she wended westward. Afar down the gorge one might catch glimpses of a glossy lustre where the evergreen laurel, white with frost, moved in the autumn wind. He lifted his head to mark its melancholy cadence, and while he listened, the moonlight was suddenly crowded from the door as three men rushed in, half helping and half constraining a fourth man forward.

"Durn my boots ef I did n't furgit the password!" cried Nick Peters with his little falsetto laugh, that seemed keyed for a fleer, although it was most graciously modulated now. "Ye mought hev shot us fur revenuers."

"I mought hev shot ye fur wuss," Con Hite growled, rising slowly from his chair, his big dark eyes betokening his displeasure. "I dunno how *ye* ever kem ter know this place."

"It 'll go no furder, Con, I 'll swear," said the horse-thief, lifting his hand to Hite's shoulder,

and affecting to see in his words an appeal for secrecy. "This," he added blandly, "is Mr. Persimmon Sneed, ez hev been a-visitin' me. Lemme make ye acquainted."

He seemed to perceive nothing incongruous in the fact that Mr. Persimmon Sneed should be blindfolded. But as Con Hite looked at the elder man, standing helpless, his head held slightly forward, the sight apparently struck his risibilities, and his wonted geniality rose to the occasion.

"An' do Mr. Persimmon Sneed always wear blinders?" he asked, with a guffaw.

Peters seemed immeasurably relieved by the change of tone.

"Whilst visitin' me, he do," he remarked. "Mr. Persimmon hev got sech a fine mem'ry fur localities, ye see."

Hite with a single gesture pulled off the bandage. "Waal, let him look about him hyar. I s'pose ye hev ter be more partic'lar 'n me 'count o' that stranger man's horse."

Peters changed countenance, his attention riveted. "What horse?" he demanded.

"The horse of the man ez war kilt, — ye know folks hev laid that job ter you-uns. Jerry," turning aside to his colleague, who had done naught but stare, "whar 's yer manners? Why n't ye gin the comp'ny a drink?"

Hite shoved the chair in which he had been seated to Persimmon Sneed, who was lugubriously rubbing his eyes, and flung himself down on a boulder lying almost outside of the recess in the moonlight, his long booted and spurred legs stretching far across the entrance. His hat on the back of his head, its brim upturned, revealed his bluff open face — it held no craft surely; he hardly seemed to notice how insistently Peters pressed after him, unmindful of his henchmen and Jerry imbibing appreciatively the product of the cheerful little copper still.

"But I never done sech ez that," protested Peters. "I always stop short o' bloodshed. I never viewed the man's beastis, ye 'll bear me witness, Con."

"Me?" said Con, with a laugh. "I dunno nuthin' 'bout yer doin's. Whar 's Mr. Sneed's horse?"

"Never seen him, — never laid eyes on him! How folks kin hev the heart ter 'cuse me of sech doin's ez I never done!" he lifted his eyes as if appealing to heaven.

"The killin' 's the wust; an' Mr. Sneed's critter bein' gone too mought make folks lay it ter ye fur sure," persisted Hite.

"I ain't seen Mr. Sneed's horse. Mr. Sneed — ye would n't b'lieve it ter look at him, but he 's a ransomed saint! ha! ha! The money fur him

will be fotched hyar ter yer still. I sent fur it ter kem by Jake Glenn; he knows ye, an' ye know him."

Con Hite's open brow did not cloud. If there were any significance perceptible in the fact that Mr. Persimmon Sneed, with so fine a head for locality, should be able to identify only the still among his various shelters during his "visit" to Nick Peters, Con Hite made no sign.

"Lord, how glad I 'll be ter git rid o' him!" Peters said in an undertone to Hite. "He hev mighty nigh argufied me ter death, — 'bout sperits, an' witches, an' salvation, an' law, an' craps, an' horse-flesh, an' weather signs. I be sorter 'feard his wife won't pay nuthin' ter git him again. He 'pears sorter under the weather now, or eavesdroppin' or suthin'. The money 'll pay me mighty pore fur my trouble. Thar — what 's that?"

He paused to listen; there was a sound other than the tinkling of the little rill near at hand or the blare of the autumn wind. A stone came rolling down the path, dislodged by a cautious step, — then another. Hite drew a revolver from his pocket, and, holding it in his right hand, stepped out on the rugged little parapet and stood there, with the depths of the gorge below him, looking up the ascent with the moonlight in his face. He spoke in a low voice to

some one approaching, and was answered in the same tone. He stepped back to give the newcomer space to enter, and as Jake Glenn came in held out his hand for the package the messenger bore.

"Let 's see it, Nick," he said, tearing it open; "it 's the money sure enough."

Old Persimmon Sneed turned his head with a certain alert interest. Perhaps he himself had doubted whether his wife would think him worth the money. There was a general flutter of good-natured gratulation, and it seemed at the moment only some preposterous mistake that Con Hite should put it into Persimmon Sneed's lean paw and close his trembling fingers over it.

"Now, scoot!" he bawled out at the top of his voice, the little den ringing with the echoes of his excitement, a second revolver drawn in his left hand. "I 'll gin ye a day's start o' these fellers." He presented the muzzle of one pistol to Peters's head, and with the other he covered one of the two henchmen in the recess of the little rock house. The other sprang up from a barrel where he sat wiping his mouth with the back of his hand; but Jerry, suddenly realizing the situation, put out a dexterous foot, and the horse-thief fell full length upon the floor, his pistol discharging as he went down. In the clamor of the echoes, and the smoke and

the flare, Persimmon Sneed disappeared, hearing as he went a wild protest, and a nimbleness of argument second hardly to his own, as Nick Peters cried out that he was robbed, his hard earnings were wrested from him, the money was his, paid him as a price, and Con Hite had let Mr. Persimmon Sneed run off with it, allowing him nothing for his trouble.

"It war his money," Con Hite averred, when they had grown calmer, and Jake Glenn had returned from a reconnoissance with the news that Hite's father had lent the fleeing Persimmon a horse, and he was by this time five miles away in the Cove. "*He* could have paid you for yer trouble in ketchin' him ef he had wanted ter."

"It war *not* his money," protested Peters, with tears in his eyes. "It war sent ter me willingly, fur a valid consideration, an' ye let him hev the money, an' his wife hev got the valid consideration — an' hyar I be lef' with the bag ter hold!"

It may be that Peters had absorbed some of the craft of argument by mere propinquity to Persimmon Sneed, or that Con Hite's conscience was unduly tender, for he long entertained a moral doubt touching his course in this transaction, — whether he had a right to pay the ransom money which Nick Peters had extorted

from Persimmon Sneed's wife to Persimmon Sneed himself, thereby defrauding Nick Peters of the fruit of his labor. Perhaps this untoward state of dubitation came about from Narcissa's scornful comment.

"Ye mought hev known that old man Persimmon Sneed would have made off with the money," she said, remembering his reproving glare at her. "I would n't hev trested him with a handful o' cornfield peas."

"But I expected him ter make off with it," protested the amazed Con; "that's why I gin it ter him."

"Then ye air jes' ez bad ez he is," she retorted coldly.

And thus it was he examined his conscience.

Persimmon Sneed had no doubts whatever as to the ownership of the money in his pocket, when one fine morning he walked into his own door, as dictatorial, as set in his own opinion as ever; the only change to be detected in his manners and conversation thereafter was the enigmatical assertion at times that he was a "ransomed saint," followed by a low chuckle of enjoyment. Those who heard this often made bold to say to one another that he "did n't act like it," and this opinion was shared by the sheriff who futilely sought some information from him touching the lair of the horse-thieves,

looking to brilliant exploits of capture. Such details as he could secure were so uncertain and contradictory as to render him suspicious that the truth was purposely withheld.

"Ye oughter remember these men air crim'nal offenders agin the law, Mr. Sneed," he said.

"Mebbe so," assented Persimmon Sneed, "mebbe so;" but the situation of Con Hite's still was the only locality which he had visited of which he was sure, and in gratitude to his rescuer he held his peace.

That he was not so softened to the world at large was manifested in the fact that he threatened to plead usury against the money-lender, and forthwith brought him down with a run to the beggaries of the legal rate. He was wont, moreover, to go to the teller of the bank at Colbury and demand of that distracted man such of his papers as were from time to time lost or mislaid, having learned from his wife that she had made the official the custodian of his valuables, these being his bank-book, the ancient returned checks, and the unused check-book.

The points which he had so laboriously made plain to the jury of view proved a total loss of perspicacious reasoning, for the land was forthwith condemned and the road opened, any oil-boring company being allowed by law a right of way thirty feet wide. The heavy hauling of the

oil company had already made a tolerable wagon track, and the passing back and forth of the men and teams and machinery added an element of interest and excitement to the thoroughfare such as Narcissa's wildest dreams had never prefigured. She had no heart for it now. When the creak of wheels on the frozen ground, and the cries of the drivers, and the thud of the hoofs of the straining four-horse teams heralded an approach, she was wont to draw close the batten shutter of the window and sit brooding over the fire, staring with moody eyes into the red coals, where she saw much invisible to the simple Ben. He knew vaguely that her grief was for the fair-haired stranger, but he could not dream in what remorseful wise. She had not failed to perceive her own agency in the betrayal of his secret, when the story of the discovery of the oil was blazoned to all the world by those mystically flaring waters in the deeps of the mountain night. It was she who had idly kindled them; she who had robbed him of his rights, of the wealth that these interlopers were garnering. She had sent him to his grave baffled, beaten, forlorn, wondering at the mystery of the hand that out of the dark had smitten him. She kept her own counsel. Her white face grew set and stern. Her words were few. She had no tears. And Ben, who found his

tyrant only the harder and the colder, scarcely remonstrated, and could only marvel when one keen, chill afternoon she sprang up, throwing her brown shawl over her head, and declared that she was going to the oil wells to see for herself what progress was making there.

All sylvan grace had departed from the spot. As the two stood on the verge of the clear space, now gashed deep in every direction in the woods and larger by a hundred acres, grim derricks rose sharply outlined against the wintry sky. It was barred with strata of gray clouds in such sombre neutrality of tint that one, in that it was less gloomy than the others, gave a suggestion of blue. Patches of snow lay about the ground. Cinders and smoke had blackened them here and there. The steam-engine, with its cylindrical boiler, seemed in the dusk some uncanny monster that had taken up its abode here, and rejoiced in the desolation it had wrought, and lived by ill deeds. It was letting off steam, and now and then it gave a puffing sigh as if it were tired after its day's work. The laborers were of a different type from the homely neighbors, and returned the contempt with which the mountaineers gazed upon them. Great piles of wood showed how the forests were being rifled for fuel. Many trees had been felled in provident foresight, and lay along the ground in vast

lengths, awaiting the axe; so many that adown the avenues thus opened toward the valley a wan glimmering caught the girl's eye, and she recognized the palings of the little mountain graveyard.

She clutched her brother's arm and pointed to it. Her eyes grew dilated and wild, her face was pale and drawn; her hand trembled as she held it out.

"Ye see, Ben, he 's close enough ter view it all — an' mebbe he does — an' he knows now who he hev got ter thank fur it all — an' I wisht he war hyar, whar I am, an' I war thar, whar he is."

Her brother thought for the moment that she was raving. The next she caught her shawl over her head, hoodwise, the wind tossing her bright hair, and declared that she was cold, and upbraided him for bringing her on this long, chilling tramp, and protested that she would come never again.

He came often afterward. The spot seemed to have a fascination for him. And within sound of the cheerful hubbub and busy whir of the industry he would lean over the palings and look at the grave, covered sometimes with a drift of leaves, and sometimes with a drift of snow, and think of the two men that it had successively housed, and nurse his grudge against the com-

pany. With an unreasoning hatred of it, Hanway felt that both were victims of the great strong corporation that was to reap the value of the discovery which was not its own save by accident. He could not appraise the justice of the dispensation by which the keen observation of the one man, and the science and experience that the other had brought to the enterprise, should fall so far short of achievement, while an idle story, the gossip of the day, should fill the hands of those who were strangers to the very thought. He grudged every augury of success; he welcomed every detail of difficulty. As time went on, the well was said to be of intermittent flow, and new borings resulted in naught but vast floods of sulphur water. Finally, when the admitted truth pervaded the community, — that the oil was practically exhausted, that it had long since ceased to pay expenses, that the company was a heavy loser by the enterprise, — he was as a man appeased.

The result was succeeded by a change in Narcissa so radical and immediate that Constant Hite could but perceive the fact that it was induced by the failure and abandonment of the work. She grew placid as of yore, and was softened, and now and again the gentle melancholy into which she fell suggested sad and reminiscent pleasure rather than the remorseful

and desperate sorrow that she had known. He began to realize that it was no sentimental and love-stricken grief she had felt for Selwyn, but a sympathy akin to his own and to her brother's; and since the disappointment of the hope of fortune must needs have come to Selwyn at last, they made shift to resign themselves, and were wont to talk freely of the dead with that affectionate and immediate interest which seems to prolong the span of a mortal's day on earth, like the tender suffusive radiance of the afterglow of a sunken sun.

The road fell quickly into disuse after the abandonment of the work. In the storms of winter, trees were uprooted and thrown athwart the way; overhanging rocks, splitting in the freeze, precipitated obstructive avalanches upon the dim serpentine convolutions; the wind piled drifts of dead leaves above the turns; and in the spring grass began to grow in the tracks of the wheels.

It held no woeful memories now for Narcissa. She loved to sit on the step of the stile and watch through the leafless sunlit trees the silver haze shimmering in the valley, where the winter wheat was all of an emerald richness, and the blue mountains afar off so near akin to the aspect of heaven that one might hardly mark where the horizon line merged the sweet soli-

tudes of earth into the solitary sky. Many a day, the spring, loitering along the shadow-flecked vistas, with the red maple-blooms overhead and violets underfoot, was the only traveler to be seen on the deserted road. And the pensive dusk was wont to deepen into the serene vernal night, sweet with the scent of the budding wild cherry, and astir with timorous tentative rustlings as of half-fledged breezes, and illumined only with the gentle lustre of the white stars; for never again was the darkness emblazoned with that haggard incandescence so long the mystery of Witch-Face Mountain.

TAKING THE BLUE RIBBON AT THE COUNTY FAIR.

JENKS HOLLIS sat on the fence. He slowly turned the quid of tobacco in his cheek, and lifting up his voice spoke with an oracular drawl: —

"Ef he kin take the certif'cate it 's the mos' ez he kin do. He ain't never a-goin' ter git no premi-*um* in this life, sure 's ye air a born sinner."

And he relapsed into silence. His long legs dangled dejectedly among the roadside weeds; his brown jeans trousers, that had despaired of ever reaching his ankles, were ornamented here and there with ill-adjusted patches, and his loose-fitting coat was out at the elbows. An old white wool hat drooped over his eyes, which were fixed absently on certain distant blue mountain ranges, that melted tenderly into the blue of the noonday sky, and framed an exquisite mosaic of poly-tinted fields in the valley, far, far below the grim gray crag on which his little home was perched.

Despite his long legs he was a light weight, or

he would not have chosen as his favorite seat so rickety a fence. His interlocutor, a heavier man, apparently had some doubts, for he leaned only slightly against one of the projecting rails as he whittled a pine stick, and with his every movement the frail structure trembled. The log cabin seemed as rickety as the fence. The little front porch had lost a puncheon here and there in the flooring — perhaps on some cold winter night when Hollis's energy was not sufficiently exuberant to convey him to the woodpile; the slender posts that upheld its roof seemed hardly strong enough to withstand the weight of the luxuriant vines with their wealth of golden gourds which had clambered far over the moss-grown clapboards; the windows had fewer panes of glass than rags; and the chimney, built of clay and sticks, leaned portentously away from the house. The open door displayed a rough, uncovered floor; a few old rush-bottomed chairs; a bedstead with a patch-work calico quilt, the mattress swagging in the centre and showing the badly arranged cords below; strings of bright red pepper hanging from the dark rafters; a group of tow-headed, grave-faced, barefooted children; and, occupying almost one side of the room, a broad, deep, old-fashioned fireplace, where winter and summer a lazy fire burned under a lazy pot.

Notwithstanding the poverty of the aspect of the place and the evident sloth of its master, it was characterized by a scrupulous cleanliness strangely at variance with its forlorn deficiencies. The rough floor was not only swept but scoured; the dark rafters, whence depended the flaming banners of the red pepper, harbored no cobwebs; the grave faces of the white-haired children bore no more dirt than was consistent with their recent occupation of making mud-pies; and the sedate, bald-headed baby, lying silent but wide-awake in an uncouth wooden cradle, was as clean as clear spring water and yellow soap could make it. Mrs. Hollis herself, seen through the vista of opposite open doors, energetically rubbing the coarse wet clothes upon the resonant washboard, seemed neat enough in her blue-and-white checked homespun dress, and with her scanty hair drawn smoothly back from her brow into a tidy little knot on the top of her head.

Spare and gaunt she was, and with many lines in her prematurely old face. Perhaps they told of the hard fight her brave spirit waged against the stern ordering of her life; of the struggles with squalor, — inevitable concomitant of poverty, — and to keep together the souls and bodies of those numerous children, with no more efficient assistance than could be wrung from

her reluctant husband in the short intervals when he did not sit on the fence. She managed as well as she could; there was an abundance of fine fruit in that low line of foliage behind the house — but everybody on Old Bear Mountain had fine fruit. Something rarer, she had good vegetables — the planting and hoeing being her own work and her eldest daughter's; an occasional shallow furrow representing the contribution of her husband's plough. The althea-bushes and the branches of the laurel sheltered a goodly number of roosting hens in these September nights; and to the pond, which had been formed by damming the waters of the spring branch in the hollow across the road, was moving even now a stately procession of geese in single file. These simple belongings were the trophies of a gallant battle against unalterable conditions and the dragging, dispiriting clog of her husband's inertia.

His inner life — does it seem hard to realize that in that uncouth personality concentred the complex, incomprehensible, ever-shifting emotions of that inner life which, after all, is so much stronger, and deeper, and broader than the material? Here, too, beat the hot heart of humanity — beat with no measured throb. He had his hopes, his pleasure, his pain, like those of a higher culture, differing only in object, and

something perhaps in degree. His disappointments were bitter and lasting; his triumphs, few and sordid; his single aspiration — to take the premium offered by the directors of the Kildeer County Fair for the best equestrian.

This incongruous and unpromising ambition had sprung up in this wise: Between the country people of Kildeer County and the citizens of the village of Colbury, the county-seat, existed a bitter and deeply rooted animosity manifesting itself at conventions, elections for the legislature, etc., the rural population voting as a unit against the town's candidate. On all occasions of public meetings there was a struggle to crush any invidious distinction against the "country boys," especially at the annual fair. Here to the rustics of Kildeer County came the tug of war. The population of the outlying districts was more numerous, and, when it could be used as a suffrage-engine, all-powerful; but the region immediately adjacent to the town was far more fertile. On those fine meadows grazed the graceful Jersey; there gamboled sundry long-tailed colts with long-tailed pedigrees; there greedy Berkshires fattened themselves to abnormal proportions; and the merinos could hardly walk, for the weight of their own rich wardrobes. The well-to-do farmers of this section were hand-in-glove with the town's people;

they drove their trotters in every day or so to get their mail, to chat with their cronies, to attend to their affairs in court, to sell or to buy — their pleasures centred in the town, and they turned the cold shoulder upon the country, which supported them, and gave their influence to Colbury, accounting themselves an integrant part of it. Thus, at the fairs the town claimed the honor and glory. The blue ribbon decorated cattle and horses bred within ten miles of the flaunting flag on the judges' stand, and the foaming mountain-torrents and the placid stream in the valley beheld no cerulean hues save those of the sky which they reflected.

The premium offered this year for the best rider was, as it happened, a new feature, and excited especial interest. The country's blood was up. Here was something for which it could fairly compete, with none of the disadvantages of the false position in which it was placed. Hence a prosperous landed proprietor, the leader of the rural faction, dwelling midway between the town and the range of mountains that bounded the county on the north and east, bethought himself one day of Jenkins Hollis, whose famous riding had been the feature of a certain dashing cavalry charge — once famous, too — forgotten now by all but the men who, for the first and only time in their existence,

penetrated in those war days the blue mountains fencing in their county from the outer world, and looked upon the alien life beyond that wooded barrier. The experience of those four years, submerged in the whirling rush of events elsewhere, survives in these eventless regions in a dreamy, dispassionate sort of longevity. And Jenkins Hollis's feat of riding stolidly — one could hardly say bravely — up an almost sheer precipice to a flame-belching battery came suddenly into the landed magnate's recollection with the gentle vapors and soothing aroma of a meditative after-dinner pipe. Quivering with party spirit, Squire Goodlet sent for Hollis and offered to lend him the best horse on the place, and a saddle and bridle, if he would go down to Colbury and beat those town fellows out on their own ground.

No misgivings had Hollis. The inordinate personal pride characteristic of the mountaineer precluded his feeling a shrinking pain at the prospect of being presented, a sorry contrast, among the well-clad, well-to-do town's people, to compete in a public contest. He did not appreciate the difference — he thought himself as good as the best.

And to-day, complacent enough, he sat upon the rickety fence at home, oracularly disparaging the equestrian accomplishments of the town's noted champion.

"I dunno — I dunno," said his young companion doubtfully. "Hackett sets mighty firm onto his saddle. He 's ez straight ez any shingle, an' ez tough ez a pine-knot. He come up hyar las' summer — war it las' summer, now? No, 't war summer afore las' — with some o' them other Colbury folks, a-fox-huntin', an' a-deer-huntin, an' one thing an' 'nother. I seen 'em a time or two in the woods. An' he kin ride jes' ez good 'mongst the gullies and boulders like ez ef he had been born in the hills. He ain't a-goin' ter be beat easy."

"It don't make no differ," retorted Jenks Hollis. "He 'll never git no premi-*um*. The certif'cate 's good a-plenty fur what ridin' he kin do."

Doubt was still expressed in the face of the young man, but he said no more, and, after a short silence, Mr. Hollis, perhaps not relishing his visitor's want of appreciation, dismounted, so to speak, from the fence, and slouched off slowly up the road.

Jacob Brice still stood leaning against the rails and whittling his pine stick, in no wise angered or dismayed by his host's unceremonious departure, for social etiquette is not very rigid on Old Bear Mountain. He was a tall athletic fellow, clad in a suit of brown jeans, which displayed, besides the ornaments of patches, sundry

deep grass stains about the knees. Not that piety induced Brice to spend much time in the lowly attitude of prayer, unless, indeed, Diana might be accounted the goddess of his worship. The green juice was pressed out when kneeling, hidden in some leafy, grassy nook, he heard the infrequent cry of the wild turkey, or his large, intent blue eyes caught a glimpse of the stately head of an antlered buck, moving majestically in the alternate sheen of the sunlight and shadow of the overhanging crags; or while with his deft hunter's hands he dragged himself by slow, noiseless degrees through the ferns and tufts of rank weeds to the water's edge, that he might catch a shot at the feeding wild duck. A leather belt around his waist supported his powder-horn and shot-pouch, — for his accoutrements were exactly such as might have been borne a hundred years ago by a hunter of Old Bear Mountain, — and his gun leaned against the trunk of a chestnut-oak.

Although he still stood outside the fence, aimlessly lounging, there was a look on his face of a half-suppressed expectancy, which rendered the features less statuesque than was their wont — an expectancy that showed itself in the furtive lifting of his eyelids now and then, enabling him to survey the doorway without turning his head. Suddenly his face reassumed its

habitual, inexpressive mask of immobility, and the furtive eyes were persistently downcast.

A flare of color, and Cynthia Hollis was standing in the doorway, leaning against its frame. She was robed, like September, in brilliant yellow. The material and make were of the meanest, but there was a certain appropriateness in the color with her slumberous dark eyes and the curling tendrils of brown hair which fell upon her forehead and were clustered together at the back of her neck. No cuffs and no collar could this costume boast, but she had shown the inclination to finery characteristic of her age and sex by wearing around her throat, where the yellow hue of her dress met the creamy tint of her skin, a row of large black beads, threaded upon a shoe-string in default of an elastic, the brass ends flaunting brazenly enough among them. She held in her hand a string of red pepper, to which she was adding some newly gathered pods. A slow job Cynthia seemed to make of it.

She took no more notice of the man under the tree than he accorded to her. There they stood, within twelve feet of each other, in utter silence, and, to all appearance, each entirely unconscious of the other's existence: he whittling his pine stick; she, slowly, slowly stringing the pods of red pepper.

There was something almost portentous in the gravity and sobriety of demeanor of this girl of seventeen; she manifested less interest in the young man than her own grandmother might have shown.

He was constrained to speak first. "Cynthy" — he said at length, without raising his eyes or turning his head. She did not answer; but he knew without looking that she had fixed those slumberous brown eyes upon him, waiting for him to go on. "Cynthy" — he said again, with a hesitating, uneasy manner. Then, with an awkward attempt at raillery, "Ain't ye never a-thinkin' 'bout a-gittin' married?"

He cast a laughing glance toward her, and looked down quickly at his clasp-knife and the stick he was whittling. It was growing very slender now.

Cynthia's serious face relaxed its gravity. "Ye air foolish, Jacob," she said, laughing. After stringing on another pepper-pod with great deliberation, she continued: "Ef I war a-studyin' 'bout a-gittin' married, thar ain't nobody round 'bout hyar cz I 'd hev." And she added another pod to the flaming red string, so bright against the yellow of her dress.

That stick could not long escape annihilation. The clasp-knife moved vigorously through its fibres, and accented certain arbitrary clauses in

its owner's retort. "Ye talk like," he said, his face as monotonous in its expression as if every line were cut in marble — "ye talk like — ye thought ez how I — war a-goin' ter ax ye — ter marry me. I ain't though, nuther."

The stick was a shaving. It fell among the weeds. The young hunter shut his clasp-knife with a snap, shouldered his gun, and without a word of adieu on either side the conference terminated, and he walked off down the sandy road.

Cynthia stood watching him until the laurel-bushes hid him from sight; then sliding from the door-frame to the step, she sat motionless, a bright-hued mass of yellow draperies and red peppers, her slumberous deep eyes resting on the leaves that had closed upon him.

She was the central figure of a still landscape. The mid-day sunshine fell in broad effulgence upon it; the homely, dun-colored shadows had been running away all the morning, as if shirking the contrast with the splendors of the golden light, until nothing was left of them except a dark circle beneath the wide-spreading trees. No breath of wind stirred the leaves, or rippled the surface of the little pond. The lethargy of the hour had descended even upon the towering pine-trees, growing on the precipitous slope of the mountain, and showing their topmost

plumes just above the frowning, gray crag — their melancholy song was hushed. The silent masses of dazzling white clouds were poised motionless in the ambient air, high above the valley and the misty expanse of the distant, wooded ranges.

A lazy, lazy day, and very, very warm. The birds had much ado to find sheltering shady nooks where they might escape the glare and the heat; their gay carols were out of season, and they blinked and nodded under their leafy umbrellas, and fanned themselves with their wings, and twittered disapproval of the weather. "Hot, hot, red-hot!" said the birds — "broiling hot!"

Now and then an acorn fell from among the serrated chestnut leaves, striking upon the fence with a sounding thwack, and rebounding in the weeds. Those chestnut-oaks always seem to unaccustomed eyes the creation of Nature in a fit of mental aberration — useful freak! the mountain swine fatten on the plenteous mast, and the bark is highly esteemed at the tan-yard.

A large cat was lying at full length on the floor of the little porch, watching with drowsy, half-closed eyes the assembled birds in the tree. But she seemed to have relinquished the pleasures of the chase until the mercury should fall.

Close in to the muddiest side of the pond over there, which was all silver and blue with the

reflection of the great masses of white clouds, and the deep azure sky, a fleet of shining, snowy geese was moored, perfectly motionless too. No circumnavigation for them this hot day.

And Cynthia's dark brown eyes, fixed upon the leafy vista of the road, were as slumberous as the noontide sunshine.

"Cynthy! whar *is* the gal?" said poor Mrs. Hollis, as she came around the house to hang out the ragged clothes on the althea-bushes and the rickety fence. "Cynthy, air ye a-goin' ter sit thar in the door all day, an' that thar pot a-bilin' all the stren'th out 'n that thar cabbige an' roas'in'-ears? Dish up dinner, child, an' don't be so slow an' slack-twisted like yer dad."

Great merriment there was, to be sure, at the Kildeer Fair grounds, situated on the outskirts of Colbury, when it became known to the convulsed town faction that the gawky Jenks Hollis intended to compete for the premium to be awarded to the best and most graceful rider. The contests of the week had as usual resulted in Colbury's favor; this was the last day of the fair, and the defeated country population anxiously but still hopefully awaited its notable event.

A warm sun shone; a brisk autumnal breeze waved the flag flying from the judges' stand; a

brass band in the upper story of that structure thrilled the air with the vibrations of popular waltzes and marches, somewhat marred now and then by mysteriously discordant bass tones; the judges, portly, red-faced, middle-aged gentlemen, sat below in cane-bottom chairs critically a-tilt on the hind legs. The rough wooden amphitheatre, a bold satire on the stately Roman edifice, was filled with the denizens of Colbury and the rosy rural faces of the country people of Kildeer County; and within the charmed arena the competitors for the blue ribbon and the saddle and bridle to be awarded to the best rider were just now entering, ready mounted, from a door beneath the tiers of seats, and were slowly making the tour of the circle around the judges' stand. One by one they came, with a certain nonchalant pride of demeanor, conscious of an effort to display themselves and their horses to the greatest advantage, and yet a little ashamed of the consciousness. For the most part they were young men, prosperous looking, and clad according to the requirements of fashion which prevailed in this little town. Shut in though it was from the pomps and vanities of the world by the encircling chains of blue ranges and the bending sky which rested upon their summits, the frivolity of the mode, though somewhat belated, found its way and ruled with

imperative rigor. Good riders they were undoubtedly, accustomed to the saddle almost from infancy, and well mounted. A certain air of gallantry, always characteristic of an athletic horseman, commended these equestrian figures to the eye as they slowly circled about. Still they came — eight — nine — ten — the eleventh, the long, lank frame of Jenkins Hollis mounted on Squire Goodlet's "John Barleycorn."

The horsemen received this ungainly addition to their party with polite composure, and the genteel element of the spectators remained silent too from the force of good breeding and good feeling; but the "roughs," always critically a-loose in a crowd, shouted and screamed with derisive hilarity. What they were laughing at Jenks Hollis never knew. Grave and stolid, but as complacent as the best, he too made the usual circuit with his ill-fitting jeans suit, his slouching old wool hat, and his long, gaunt figure. But he sat the spirited "John Barleycorn" as if he were a part of the steed, and held up his head with unwonted dignity, inspired perhaps by the stately attitudes of the horse, which were the result of no training nor compelling reins, but the instinct transmitted through a long line of high-headed ancestry. Of a fine old family was "John Barleycorn."

A deeper sensation was in store for the spec-

tators. Before Jenkins Hollis's appearance most of them had heard of his intention to compete, but the feeling was one of unmixed astonishment when entry No. 12 rode into the arena, and, on the part of the country people, this surprise was supplemented by an intense indignation. The twelfth man was Jacob Brice. As he was a "mounting boy," one would imagine that, if victory should crown his efforts, the rural faction ought to feel the elation of success, but the prevailing sentiment toward him was that which every well-conducted mind must entertain concerning the individual who runs against the nominee. Notwithstanding the fact that Brice was a notable rider, too, and well calculated to try the mettle of the town's champion, there arose from the excited countrymen a keen, bitter, and outraged cry of "Take him out!" So strongly does the partisan heart pulsate to the interests of the nominee! This frantic petition had no effect on the interloper. A man who has inherited half a dozen violent quarrels, any one of which may at any moment burst into a vendetta, — inheriting little else, — is not easily dismayed by the disapprobation of either friend or foe. His statuesque features, shaded by the drooping brim of his old black hat were as calm as ever, and his slow blue eyes did not, for one moment, rest upon the excited scene about

him, so unspeakably new to his scanty experience. His fine figure showed to great advantage on horseback, despite his uncouth, coarse garb; he was mounted upon a sturdy, brown mare of obscure origin, but good-looking, clean-built, sure-footed, and with the blended charm of spirit and docility; she represented his whole estate, except his gun and his lean, old hound, that had accompanied him to the fair, and was even now improving the shining hour by quarreling over a bone outside the grounds with other people's handsomer dogs.

The judges were exacting. The riders were ordered to gallop to the right — and around they went. To the left — and there was again the spectacle of the swiftly circling equestrian figures. They were required to draw up in a line, and to dismount; then to mount, and again to alight. Those whom these manœuvres proved inferior were dismissed at once, and the circle was reduced to eight. An exchange of horses was commanded; and once more the riding, fast and slow, left and right, the mounting and dismounting were repeated. The proficiency of the remaining candidates rendered them worthy of more difficult ordeals. They were required to snatch a hat from the ground while riding at full gallop. Pistols loaded with blank cartridges were fired behind the horses, and subsequently

close to their quivering and snorting nostrils, in order that the relative capacity of the riders to manage a frightened and unruly steed might be compared, and the criticism of the judges mowed the number down to four.

Free speech is conceded by all right-thinking people to be a blessing. It is often a balm. Outside of the building and of earshot the defeated aspirants took what comfort they could in consigning, with great fervor and volubility, all the judicial magnates to that torrid region unknown to polite geographical works.

Of the four horsemen remaining in the ring, two were Jenkins Hollis and Jacob Brice. Short turns at full gallop were prescribed. The horses were required to go backward at various gaits. Bars were brought in and the crowd enjoyed the exhibition of the standing-leap, at an ever-increasing height and then the flying-leap — a tumultuous confused impression of thundering hoofs and tossing mane and grim defiant faces of horse and rider, in the lightning-like moment of passing. Obstructions were piled on the track for the "long jumps," and in one of the wildest leaps a good rider was unhorsed and rolled on the ground while his recreant steed that had balked at the last moment scampered around and around the arena in a wild effort to find the door beneath the tiers of seats to escape so

fierce a competition. This accident reduced the number of candidates to the two mountaineers and Tip Hackett, the man whom Jacob had pronounced a formidable rival. The circling about, the mounting and dismounting, the exchange of horses were several times repeated without any apparent result, and excitement rose to fever heat.

The premium and certificate lay between the three men. The town faction trembled at the thought that the substantial award of the saddle and bridle, with the decoration of the blue ribbon, and the intangible but still precious secondary glory of the certificate and the red ribbon might be given to the two mountaineers, leaving the crack rider of Colbury in an ignominious lurch; while the country party feared Hollis's defeat by Hackett rather less than that Jenks would be required to relinquish the premium to the interloper Brice, for the young hunter's riding had stricken a pang of prophetic terror to more than one partisan rustic's heart. In the midst of the perplexing doubt, which tried the judges' minds, came the hour for dinner, and the decision was postponed until after that meal.

The competitors left the arena, and the spectators transferred their attention to unburdening hampers, or to jostling one another in the dining-hall.

Everybody was feasting but Cynthia Hollis. The intense excitement of the day, the novel sights and sounds utterly undreamed of in her former life, the abruptly struck chords of new emotions suddenly set vibrating within her, had dulled her relish for the midday meal; and while the other members of the family repaired to the shade of a tree outside the grounds to enjoy that refection, she wandered about the "floral hall," gazing at the splendors of bloom thronging there, all so different from the shy grace, the fragility of poise, the delicacy of texture of the flowers of her ken, — the rhododendron, the azalea, the Chilhowee lily, — yet vastly imposing in their massed exuberance and scarlet pride, for somehow they all seemed high colored.

She went more than once to note with a kind of aghast dismay those trophies of feminine industry, the quilts; some were of the "log cabin" and "rising sun" variety, but others were of geometric intricacy of form and were kaleidoscopic of color with an amazing labyrinth of stitchings and embroideries — it seemed a species of effrontery to dub one gorgeous poly-tinted silken banner a quilt. But already it bore a blue ribbon, and its owner was the richer by the prize of a glass bowl and the envy of a score of deft-handed competitors. She gazed upon the

glittering jellies and preserves, upon the biscuits and cheeses, the hair-work and wax flowers, and paintings. These latter treated for the most part of castles and seas rather than of the surrounding altitudes, but Cynthia came to a pause of blank surprise in front of a shadow rather than a picture which represented a spring of still brown water in a mossy cleft of a rock where the fronds of a fern seemed to stir in the foreground. "I hev viewed the like o' that a many a time," she said disparagingly. To her it hardly seemed rare enough for the blue ribbon on the frame.

In the next room she dawdled through great piles of prize fruits and vegetables — water-melons unduly vast of bulk, peaches and pears and pumpkins of proportions never seen before out of a nightmare, stalks of Indian corn eighteen feet high with seven ears each, — all apparently attesting what they could do when they would, and that all the enterprise of Kildeer County was not exclusively of the feminine persuasion.

Finally Cynthia came out from the midst of them and stood leaning against one of the large pillars which supported the roof of the amphitheatre, still gazing about the half-deserted building, with the smouldering fires of her slumberous eyes newly kindled.

To other eyes and ears it might not have

seemed a scene of tumultuous metropolitan life, with the murmuring trees close at hand dappling the floor with sycamore shadows, the fields of Indian corn across the road, the exuberant rush of the stream down the slope just beyond, the few hundred spectators who had intently watched the events of the day; but to Cynthia Hollis the excitement of the crowd and movement and noise could no further go.

By the natural force of gravitation Jacob Brice presently was walking slowly and apparently aimlessly around to where she was standing. He said nothing, however, when he was beside her, and she seemed entirely unconscious of his presence. Her yellow dress was as stiff as a board, and as clean as her strong, young arms could make it; at her throat were the shining black beads; on her head she wore a limp, yellow calico sunbonnet, which hung down over her eyes, and almost obscured her countenance. To this article she perhaps owed the singular purity and transparency of her complexion, as much as to the mountain air, and the chiefly vegetable fare of her father's table. She wore it constantly, although it operated almost as a mask, rendering her more easily recognizable to their few neighbors by her flaring attire than by her features, and obstructing from her own view all surrounding scenery, so

that she could hardly see the cow, which so much of her time she was slowly poking after.

She spoke unexpectedly, and without any other symptom that she knew of the young hunter's proximity. "I never thought, Jacob, ez how ye would hev come down hyar, all the way from the mountings, to ride agin my dad, an' beat him out'n that thar saddle an' bridle."

"Ye won't hev nothin' ter say ter me," retorted Jacob sourly.

A long silence ensued.

Then he resumed didactically, but with some irrelevancy, "I tole ye t'other day ez how ye war old enough ter be a-studyin' 'bout gittin' married."

"They don't think nothin' of ye ter our house, Jacob. Dad 's always a-jowin' at ye." Cynthia's candor certainly could not be called in question.

The young hunter replied with some natural irritation: "He hed better not let me hear him, ef he wants to keep whole bones inside his skin. He better not tell me, nuther."

"He don't keer enough 'bout ye, Jacob, ter tell ye. He don't think nothin' of ye."

Love is popularly supposed to dull the mental faculties. It developed in Jacob Brice sudden strategic abilities.

"Thar is them ez does," he said diplomatically.

Cynthia spoke promptly with more vivacity than usual, but in her customary drawl and apparently utterly irrelevantly: —

"I never in all my days see no sech red-headed gal ez that thar Becky Stiles. She 's the red-headedest gal ever I see." And Cynthia once more was silent.

Jacob resumed, also irrelevantly: —

"When I goes a-huntin' up yander ter Pine Lick, they is mighty perlite ter me. They ain't never done nothin' agin me, ez I knows on." Then, after a pause of deep cogitation, he added, "Nor hev they said nothin' agin me, nuther."

Cynthia took up her side of the dialogue, if dialogue it could be called, with wonted irrelevancy: "That thar Becky Stiles, she 's got the freckledest face — ez freckled ez any turkey-aig" (with an indescribable drawl on the last word).

"They ain't done nothin' agin me," reiterated Jacob astutely, "nor said nothin' nuther — none of 'em."

Cynthia looked hard across the amphitheatre at the distant Great Smoky Mountains shimmering in the hazy September sunlight — so ineffably beautiful, so delicately blue, that they might have seemed the ideal scenery of some impossibly lovely ideal world. Perhaps she was wondering what the unconscious Becky Stiles, far

away in those dark woods about Pine Lick, had secured in this life besides her freckled face. Was this the sylvan deity of the young hunter's adoration?

Cynthia took off her sunbonnet to use it for a fan. Perhaps it was well for her that she did so at this moment; it had so entirely concealed her head that her hair might have been the color of Becky Stiles's, and no one the wiser. The dark brown tendrils curled delicately on her creamy forehead; the excitement of the day had flushed her pale cheeks with an unwonted glow; her eyes were alight with their newly kindled fires; the clinging curtain of her bonnet had concealed the sloping curves of her shoulders — altogether she was attractive enough, despite the flare of her yellow dress, and especially attractive to the untutored eyes of Jacob Brice. He relented suddenly, and lost all the advantages of his tact and diplomacy.

"I likes ye better nor I does Becky Stiles," he said moderately. Then with more fervor, "I likes ye better nor any gal I ever see."

The usual long pause ensued.

"Ye hev got a mighty cur'ous way o' showin' it," Cynthia replied.

"I dunno what ye 're talkin' 'bout, Cynthy."

"Ye hev got a mighty cur'ous way o' showin' it," she reiterated, with renewed animation —

"a-comin' all the way down hyar from the mountings ter beat my dad out'n that thar saddle an' bridle, what he 's done sot his heart onto. Mighty cur'ous way."

"Look hyar, Cynthy." The young hunter broke off suddenly, and did not speak again for several minutes. A great perplexity was surging this way and that in his slow brains — a great struggle was waging in his heart. He was to choose between love and ambition — nay, avarice too was ranged beside his aspiration. He felt himself an assured victor in the competition, and he had seen that saddle and bridle. They were on exhibition to-day, and to him their material and workmanship seemed beyond expression wonderful, and elegant, and substantial. He could never hope otherwise to own such accoutrements. His eyes would never again even rest upon such resplendent objects, unless indeed in Hollis's possession. Any one who has ever loved a horse can appreciate a horseman's dear desire that beauty should go beautifully caparisoned. And then, there was his pride in his own riding, and his anxiety to have his preeminence in that accomplishment acknowledged and recognized by his friends, and, dearer triumph still, by his enemies. A terrible pang before he spoke again.

"Look hyar, Cynthy," he said at last; "ef

ye will marry me, I won't go back in yander no more. I 'll leave the premi-*um* ter them ez kin git it."

"Ye 're foolish, Jacob," she replied, still fanning with the yellow calico sunbonnet. "Ain't I done tole ye, ez how they don't think nothin' of ye ter our house? I don't want all of 'em a-jowin' at me, too."

"Ye talk like ye ain't got good sense, Cynthy," said Jacob irritably. "What 's ter hender me from hitchin' up my mare ter my uncle's wagon an' ye an' me a-drivin' up hyar to the Cross-Roads, fifteen mile, and git Pa'son Jones ter marry us? We 'll get the license down hyar ter the Court House afore we start. An' while they 'll all be a-foolin' away thar time a-ridin' round that thar ring, ye an' me will be a-gittin' married." Ten minutes ago Jacob Brice did not think riding around that ring was such a reprehensible waste of time. "What 's ter hender? It don't make no differ how they jow then."

"I done tole ye, Jacob," said the sedate Cynthia, still fanning with the sunbonnet.

With a sudden return of his inspiration, Jacob retorted, affecting an air of stolid indifference: "Jes' ez *ye* choose. I won't hev ter ax Becky Stiles twict."

And he turned to go.

"I never said no, Jacob," said Cynthia precipitately. "I never said ez how I would n't hev ye."

"Waal, then, jes' come along with me right now while I hitch up the mare. I ain't a-goin' ter leave yer a-standin' hyar. Ye 're too skittish. Time I come back ye 'd hev done run away I dunno whar." A moment's pause and he added: "Is ye a-goin' ter stand thar all day, Cynthy Hollis, a-lookin' up an' around, and a-turnin' yer neck fust this way and then t'other, an' a-lookin' fur all the worl' like a wild turkey in a trap, or one o' them thar skeery young deer, or sech senseless critters? What ails the gal?"

"Thar 'll be nobody ter help along the work ter our house," said Cynthia, the weight of the home difficulties bearing heavily on her conscience.

"What 's ter hender ye from a-goin' down thar an' lendin' a hand every wunst in a while? But ef ye 're a-goin' ter stand thar like ye hed n't no more action than a — a-dunno-what, — jes' like yer dad, I ain't. I 'll jes' leave ye a-growed ter that thar post, an' I 'll jes' light out stiddier, an' afore the cows git ter Pine Lick, I 'll be thar too. Jes' ez ye choose. Come along ef ye wants ter come. I ain't a-goin' ter ax ye no more."

"I 'm a-comin'," said Cynthia.

There was great though illogical rejoicing on the part of the country faction when the crowds were again seated, tier above tier, in the amphitheatre, and the riders were once more summoned into the arena, to discover from Jacob Brice's unaccounted-for absence that he had withdrawn and left the nominee to his chances.

In the ensuing competition it became very evident to the not altogether impartially disposed judges that they could not, without incurring the suspicions alike of friend and foe, award the premium to their fellow-townsman. Straight as a shingle though he might be, more prepossessing to the eye, the ex-cavalryman of fifty battles was far better trained in all the arts of horsemanship.

A wild shout of joy burst from the rural party when the most portly and rubicund of the portly and red-faced judges advanced into the ring and decorated Jenkins Hollis with the blue ribbon. A frantic antistrophe rent the air. "Take it off!" vociferated the bitter town faction — "take it off!"

A diversion was produced by the refusal of the Colbury champion to receive the empty honor of the red ribbon and the certificate. Thus did he except to the ruling of the judges. In high dudgeon he faced about and left the arena, followed shortly by the decorated Jenks, bearing

the precious saddle and bridle, and going with a wooden face to receive the congratulations of his friends.

The entries for the slow mule race had been withdrawn at the last moment; and the spectators, balked of that unique sport, and the fair being virtually over, were rising from their seats and making their noisy preparations for departure. Before Jenks had cleared the fair-building, being somewhat impeded by the moving mass of humanity, he encountered one of his neighbors, a listless mountaineer, who spoke on this wise: —

"Does ye know that thar gal o' yourn — that thar Cynthy?"

Mr. Hollis nodded his expressionless head — presumably he did know Cynthia.

"Waal," continued his leisurely interlocutor, still interrogative, "does ye know Jacob Brice?"

Ill-starred association of ideas! There was a look of apprehension on Jenkins Hollis's wooden face.

"They hev done got a license down hyar ter the Court House an' gone a-kitin' out on the Old B'ar road."

This was explicit.

"Whar 's my horse?" exclaimed Jenks, appropriating "John Barleycorn" in his haste. Great as was his hurry, it was not too impera-

tive to prevent him from strapping upon the horse the premium saddle, and inserting in his mouth the new bit and bridle. And in less than ten minutes a goodly number of recruits from the crowd assembled in Colbury were also "a-kitin'" out on the road to Old Bear, delighted with a new excitement, and bent on running down the eloping couple with no more appreciation of the sentimental phase of the question and the tender illusions of love's young dream than if Jacob and Cynthia were two mountain foxes.

Down the red-clay slopes of the outskirts of the town "John Barleycorn" thunders with a train of horsemen at his heels. Splash into the clear fair stream whose translucent depths tell of its birthplace among the mountain springs — how the silver spray showers about as the pursuers surge through the ford leaving behind them a foamy wake! — and now they are pressing hard up the steep ascent of the opposite bank, and galloping furiously along a level stretch of road, with the fences and trees whirling by, and the September landscape flying on the wings of the wind. The chase leads past fields of tasseled Indian corn, with yellowing thickly swathed ears, leaning heavily from the stalk; past wheat-lands, the crops harvested and the crab-grass having its day at last; past "woods-lots" and their black

shadows, and out again into the September sunshine; past rickety little homes, not unlike Hollis's own, with tow-headed children, exactly like his, standing with wide eyes, looking at the rush and hurry of the pursuit — sometimes in the ill-kept yards a wood-fire is burning under the boiling sorghum kettle, or beneath the branches of the orchard near at hand a cider-mill is crushing the juice out of the red and yellow, ripe and luscious apples. Homeward-bound prize cattle are overtaken — a Durham bull, reluctantly permitting himself to be led into a fence corner that the hunt may sweep by unobstructed, and turning his proud blue-ribboned head angrily toward the riders as if indignant that anything except him should absorb attention; a gallant horse, with another floating blue streamer, bearing himself as becometh a king's son; the chase comes near to crushing sundry grunting porkers impervious to pride and glory in any worldly distinctions of cerulean decorations, and at last is fain to draw up and wait until a flock of silly overdressed sheep, running in frantic fear every way but the right way, can be gathered together and guided to a place of safety.

And once more, forward; past white frame houses with porches, and vine-grown verandas, and well-tended gardens, and groves of oak and beech and hickory trees — "John Barleycorn"

makes an ineffectual but gallant struggle to get in at the large white gate of one of these comfortable places, Squire Goodlet's home, but he is urged back into the road, and again the pursuit sweeps on. Those blue mountains, the long parallel ranges of Old Bear and his brothers, seem no more a misty, uncertain mirage against the delicious indefinable tints of the horizon. Sharply outlined they are now, with dark, irregular shadows upon their precipitous slopes which tell of wild ravines, and rock-lined gorges, and swirling mountain torrents, and great, beetling, gray crags. A breath of balsams comes on the freshening wind — the lungs expand to meet it. There is a new aspect in the scene; a revivifying current thrills through the blood; a sudden ideal beauty descends on prosaic creation.

"'Pears like I can't git my breath good in them flat countries," says Jenkins Hollis to himself, as "John Barleycorn" improves his speed under the exhilarating influence of the wind. "I'm nigh on to sifflicated every time I goes down yander ter Colbury" (with a jerk of his wooden head in the direction of the village).

Long stretches of woods are on either side of the road now, with no sign of the changing season in the foliage save the slender, pointed, scarlet leaves and creamy plumes of the sourwood, gleaming here and there; and presently another

panorama of open country unrolls to the view. Two or three frame houses appear with gardens and orchards, a number of humble log cabins, and a dingy little store, and the Cross-Roads are reached. And here the conclusive intelligence meets the party that Jacob and Cynthia were married by Parson Jones an hour ago, and were still "a-kitin'," at last accounts, out on the road to Old Bear.

The pursuit stayed its ardor. On the auspicious day when Jenkins Hollis took the blue ribbon at the County Fair and won the saddle and bridle he lost his daughter.

They saw Cynthia no more until late in the autumn when she came, without a word of self-justification or apology for her conduct, to lend her mother a helping hand in spinning and weaving her little brothers' and sisters' clothes. And gradually the *éclat* attendant upon her nuptials was forgotten, except that Mrs. Hollis now and then remarks that she "dunno how we could hev bore up agin Cynthy's a-runnin' away like she done, ef it hed n't a-been fur that thar saddle an' bridle an' takin' the blue ribbon at the County Fair."

THE CASTING VOTE.

I.

An election of civil and judicial officers was impending in Kildeer County when a comet appeared in the July sky, a mysterious, aloof, uncanny presence, that invaded the night and the stereotyped routine of nature with that gruesome effect of the phenomenal which gives to the mind so definite a realization of how dear and secure is the prosaic sense of custom.

All the lenses of the great observatories of the world had, in a manner, sought to entertain the strange visitant of the heavens. The learned had gone so far as to claim its acquaintance, to recognize it as the returning comet of a date long gone by. It even carried amidst its shining glories, along the far unimagined ways of its orbit, the name of a human being — of the man who had discovered it on its former visit, for thus splendidly does astronomy honor its votaries. Less scientific people regarded it askance as in some sort harbinger of woe, and spoke of presage, recalling other comets, and the commotions that came in their train — from the

Deluge, with the traditional cometary influences rife in the breaking up of "the fountains of the great deep," to the victories of Mohammed II. and the threatened overthrow of Christendom, and even down to our own war of 1812. Others, again, scorned superstition, and entertained merely practical misgivings concerning the weight, density, and temperature of the comet, lest the eccentric aerial wanderer should run amuck of the earth in some confusion touching the right of way through space.

Meanwhile, it grew from the semblance of a vaporous tissue — an illuminated haze only discernible through the telescope, the private view of the favored few — till it gradually became visible to the unassisted eye of the *profanum vulgus*, and finally it flamed across the darkling spaces with its white crown of glory, its splendid wing-like train, and its effect of motion as of a wondrous flight among the stars — and all the world, and, for aught we know, many worlds, gazed at it.

Only in some great desert, the vast stretches of unsailed seas, or the depths of uninhabited forests, were its supernal splendors unnoted. It sunk as wistful, as tremulous, a reflection in a lonely pool in the dense mountain wilds as any simple star, a familiar of these haunts, that had looked down to mark its responsive image year

after year, for countless ages, whenever the season brought it, in its place in the glittering mail of the Archer, or among the jewels of the Northern Crown, once more to the spot it had known and its tryst with its fair semblance in the water.

The great silver flake which the comet struck out upon the serene surface lay glinting there among the lesser stellar reflections, when a man, kneeling in a gully of the steep bank sloping to the "salt lick," leaned forward suddenly to gaze at it; then, with a gasp, turned his eyes upward to that flaming blade drawn athwart the peaceful sky. He did not utter a sound. The habit of silence essential to the deer-hunter kept its mechanical hold upon his nerves. Only the hand with which he grasped the half-exposed roots of a great sycamore-tree, denuded in some partial caving of the bank long ago, relaxed and trembled slightly.

He was a man of scant and narrow experience, his world the impenetrable mountain wilderness, and, though seemingly the pupil of nature, versed in the ways of beast and bird, the signs of the clouds, the seasons of bourgeoning and burr, it was but of casual external aspects. He knew naught of its wondrous history, its subtler significance, its strange record — the flood-tides registered on that cliff beyond the

laurel; the reptilian trail in the ledge beneath the butt of his rifle, the imprint still fast in the solid rock, albeit the species extinct; the great bones of ancient unknown beasts sunk in the depressions of this saline quagmire, which herds of them had once frequented for the salt, as did of late the buffalo, and now the timorous deer, wont to come, like shadows wavering in the wind, to lick the briny earth. The strange, glinting blade overhead had no claim on his recognition as the "comet of Aristotle," or the "evil-disposed comet" personified by the Italians as Sir Great-Lance, *il Signor Astone*, or Halley's comet, or Donati's. Self is the centre of the solar system with many souls, and around this point do all its incidents revolve. For *him* that wondrous white fire was kindled in the skies, for *him*, in special relation to his small life, to the wish nearest his hot human heart, to the clumsy scheme dear to his slow, crude brain. He thought it a warning then: and later he thought this still.

Some vague stir — the wind perhaps, or perhaps a light-footed dryad — flitted past and was gone. The surface of the "lick" rippled with her footprints, and was smooth again. All the encompassing masses of trees and undergrowth about the place were densely black and opaque, giving the sense of absolute solidity and weight, except upon the verges, which were somehow

shaded off into a cloudy brown against the translucent dove-tinted tissues in which the night seemed enveloped and obscured save for the white gleaming of the stars. This was the clear color that the brackish water wore as it reflected the night. It reflected suddenly a face — a face with a long velvety muzzle, a pair of spreading antlers, and dark eyes, gentle, timorous, liquidly bright. The water stirred with a sibilant lapping sound as the buck's tongue licked at the margin. Once he held up his head to listen, with his hoof lifted, then he bent again to the ripples. There was slight relation between him, the native of these woods, and that wayward waif of the skies; but among the unnumbered influences and incidents of its course it served to save that humble sylvan life for a space. The hunter neither saw nor heard.

It was only when the deer with a sudden snort and a precipitate bound fled crashing through the laurel that Walter Hoxon became aware of his presence, and of the stealthy approach that had alarmed him. The approach was stealthy no longer. A quick, nervous tread, a rustling of the boughs, and as the hunter rose to his feet his elder brother emerged from the undergrowth, taller than he as they stood together on the margin of the lick, more active, sinewy, alert.

"Why n't ye take a shot at him, Wat?" cried Justus Hoxon tumultuously. "I 'll be bound ye war nappin'," he added in keen rebuke.

A pause, then Walter Hoxon pulled himself together and retorted: —

"Nappin'!" in scornful falsetto. "How *could* I get a shot, with ye a-trompin' up ez n'isy ez a herd o' cattle?"

The reproach evidently struck home, for the elder said nothing. With the thoroughness characteristic of the habitual liar, Walter proceeded to add circumstance to his original statement.

"I seen the buck whenst he fust kem sidlin' an' slippin' up ter the water, oneasy an' onsartain from the fust minute. I hed jes' sighted my rifle. An' hyar ye kem, a-bulgin' out o' the lau'l, an' sp'iled my shot." As the verisimilitude of his representations bore upon him, he unconsciously assumed the sentiments natural to the situation simulated. "Who tole ye ez I war hyar, anyhows?" he demanded angrily.

"'Dosia," replied Justus Hoxon in a mild tone. Then, with an effort at exculpation, "I 'lowed ye 'd be keen — plumb sharp set — fur news 'bout the prospec's o' the 'lection. An' she 'lowed ez ye hed kem down hyar hopin' ter git a deer. 'T war The'dosia."

At the name the other had turned slightly away and looked down, a gesture that invidious daylight might have interpreted as anxiety, or faltering, or at the least replete with consciousness. But even if open to observation, it could scarcely have signified aught to Justus Hoxon, wrapped in his own thoughts, and in his absorbing interest in the events of the day. His mental attitude was so apparent to his brother, albeit his form was barely distinguishable as they stood together by the salt lick, that Wat ventured a question — a bold one, it seemed to him, and he felt a chill because of its temerity.

"Glad ter see ye, I s'pose?"

"Plumb tickled ter death," exclaimed Justus, his laughing voice full of reminiscent enthusiasm. "Thar war a big crowd at the Cross-Roads ter hear the speakin', an' a toler'ble gatherin' at Sycamore Gap. Everybody inquired partic'lar arter ye, an' whenst I tole 'em ye war tuk sick, an' could n't be thar, an' I war 'lectioneerin' in yer place, they shuck han's, an' shuck han's. One ole man — ole Sam Coggins, up ter Sims's Mill — says ter me, he says, 'I dunno yer brother, Justus Hoxon; but blister my boots, ef I don't vote fur anybody ez air kin ter you-uns, an' ez ye hev set yer heart on 'lectin' ter office.' An' the way folks inquired arter ye, an' " —

"I ain't talkin' 'bout the 'lection," Wat broke in brusquely. "I war axin' 'bout 'Dosia. She war" — he hesitated — "liable ter be glad ter see ye, I reckon."

There was a note of surprise in his brother's voice from which Wat shrank in sudden alarm. "Oh, '*Dosia!* Course she war glad. I seen her jes' now, an' she told me ez ye hed kem down ter the lick ter git a shot at the deer, bein' ez she hed 'lowed the venison war powerful good 'bout now. I never stayed but a minute. I says, 'Dosia, ye an' me hev got the rest o' our lives ter do our courtin' in, but this 'lection hev got ter be tended ter *now*, kase ef Wat ain't 'lected it 'll set him back all his life. Some folks 'low ez 't ain't perlite an' respec'ful, nohow, fur pore folks like we-uns ter run fur office, like ez ef we war good ez anybody.' An' 'Dosia she jes' hustled me out'n the house. 'G'long! G'long! Do *everything* 'bout'n the 'lection! Turn every stone! Time enough fur courtin' arterward! Time enough!'"

Once more Justus laughed contentedly.

The man beside him stirred uneasily, then broke out irritably: "Waal, *I'm* powerful tired o' this 'lection foolishness, fur one. I wisht I hed never let ye push an' boost me inter it. I reckon them war right ez 'lowed pore folks like we-uns ain't fit ter run fur office, an' ain't goin' ter git

'lected. I 'd never hev dreamt o' sech ef it hed n't been fur you-uns — never in this worl'." Walter's voice sunk moodily, and he had a flouting gesture as he turned aside.

A vicarious ambition is the most ungrateful of passions. There was something more than anger, than eager affection, than urgent reproach, than prescient alarm, albeit all rang sharply forth, in his brother's voice raised to reply; it was a keen note of helplessness, from which Walter's nerves recoiled with a sense of pain, so insistently clamorous it was.

"How kin ye say that!" cried Justus. "Fur ye ter stan' thar, ready ter throw away all yer good chances, jes' kase ye hev got the rheumatics an' don't feel like viewin' the people — though it 'pears like ye air well enough ter go huntin' of deer of a damp night at a salt lick! An' then, kase a mean-spirited half-liver flings dirt on ye an' yer fambly, fur ye ter sit down on a low stool, an' fill yer mouth with mud, an' 'low this air plenty good enough fur we-uns! 'Pore folks ain't fit ter git 'lected ter office!'" with scornful iteration. "My Lord! this hyar is a democratic kentry!" with an echo from the stump speeches of the day. "Leastwise the folks yander at Sycamore Gap 'peared ter think so. This hyar Tom Markham he war speakin' on the issues o' the day, an' bein' he 's

a frien' o' Sheriff Quigley's, he tuk a turn at me an' you-uns, o' course. Tole the folks how my dad an' mam died whenst I war twelve year old, an' how the only reason the fambly warn't sent ter the pore-house war kase the county folks war dil'tory, an' put it off, till they 'lowed our own house war pore enough. An' then he sot out ter be mighty funny, an' mocked the way I useter call the t'other chil'n 'Fambly,' sech ez — 'Fambly, kem ter dinner, Fambly!' 'Shet up yer cryin', Fambly!' An' then he tole how I cooked — gathered all sorts o' yarbs an' vegetables tergether an' sot a pot ter bile, an' whenever 'Fambly' war hongry 'Fambly' tuk a snack, an' gracefully eat out'n the pot with thar fingers. An' sometimes 'Fambly' war moved ter wash thar clothes, an' they all repaired ter the ruver-bank, an' rubbed out thar rags, an' hung 'em on the bushes ter dry — an', duty done, 'Fambly' went a-wadin'. Everybody jes' laffed an' laffed!"

There was a strained tone in his voice, not far foreign to a sob, as he repeated these derisive flouts at his early and forlorn estate.

"An' now," resuming their rehearsal, "this enlightened constituency was asked ter bestow on a scion o' this same 'Fambly' — ignorant, scrub, pauper — an office of great importance to the people, that needed to fill it a man o'

eddication an' experiunce, varsed in the ways o' the world — asked to bestow the office o' sheriff o' the county on a man who war so obviously incomp'tent an' illit'rate that he darsn't face the people ter make his perposterous demand!"

The wind came and went. The darkling bushes bowed and bent again. The leaves took up their testimony in elusive, sibilant mutterings. Justus Hoxon's eyes were cast upward for a moment, as he watched a massive bough of an oak-tree sway against the far sky, shutting off the stars, which became visible anew as the elastic branch swung back once more. Only the pallor of his face and a certain lustrous liquid gleam betokening his eyes were distinguishable to his brother, who nevertheless watched him with anxiety and quickened breathing as he went on: —

"That thar feller hed sca'cely stepped down off'n that thar stump afore I war on ter it. I asked fur a few minutes' attention, an' 'lowed, I did, that Mr. Markham's account o' the humble beginnin's of me an' 'Fambly' war accurate an' exac'. (Everybody hed looked fur me ter deny it, or ter git mad, or suthin', an' they war toler'ble s'prised.) 'Fambly' *did* eat out'n the pot permiscuous, an' made a mighty pore dinner thar many a day. An' 'Fambly' washed

thar clothes ez described, infrequent enough, an' no doubt war ez ragged an' dirty ez they war hongry. But, I said, Mr. Markham hed n't told the haffen o' it. Cold winter nights, when the snow sifted in through the cracks, an' the wind blew in the rotten old door, 'Fambly' liked ter hev friz ter death. They hed the pneumonia, an' whoopin'-cough, an' croup; an' in summer, bein' a perverse set o' brats, 'Fambly' hed fever an' ager, an' similar ailments common ter the young o' the human race, *the same ez ef 'Fambly' war folks!* 'T war 'stonishin', kem ter think of it, how 'Fambly' hed the insurance ter grow up ter *look* like folks, let alone settin' out ter run fur office; an' ef God hed n't raised 'em up some mighty good frien's in this county, I reckon thar would n't be much o' 'Fambly' left. Some folks 'low ez Providence hev got mighty leetle jedgmint in worldly affairs, an' this mus' be one o' the strikin' instances of it. These frien's gin the bigges' boy work ter do, an' that holped ter keep 'Fambly's' bodies an' souls tergether. I reckon, says I, that I hev ploughed in the fields o' haffen the men in our deestric'; I hev worked in the tan-yard; I hev been striker in the blacksmith shop; an' all the time that pot, aforesaid, b'iled at home, an' 'Fambly' tuk thar dinner thar constant, *with* thar fingers, *ez aforesaid.* But 'Fambly'

warn't so durned ragged, nuther. Good neighbors gin 'em some clothes wunst in a while, an' l'arned the gals ter sew an' cook some. An' thar kem ter be a skillet an' a fryin'-pan on the h'a'th ter holp the pot out. Why, 'Fambly' got so prosperous that one day, whenst a' ole, drunken, cripple, ragged man war passin', they enj'yed themselves mightily, laffin' at somebody po'rer than themselves. An' ole Pa'son Tyson war goin' by in his gig, an' *he* tuk note o' the finger o' scorn, an' he stopped. He said mighty leetle, but he tuk the trouble ter cut a stout hickory sprout, an' he gin 'Fambly' a good thrashin' all roun'. It lasted 'Fambly' well. They ain't laffed at 'God's pore' sence! Waal, 'Fambly''s takin' up too much o' this enlightened assembly's attention. Enough to tell what's kem o' 'Fambly.' The oldes' gal went ter free school, l'arned ter read, write, an' cipher, an' married Pa'son Tyson's son, ez air a minister o' the gospel a-ridin' a Methodis' circuit in north Georgy now. An' the second gal" — his voice faltered — "*she* went ter free school, l'arned mo' still o' readin' an' writin' an' cipherin', an' taught school two year down on Bird Creek, an' war goin' ter be married ter a good man, well-ter-do, who had built her a house, not knowin' ez God hed prepared her a mansion in the skies. She is livin' *thar* now!

An' las', the Benjamin o' all the tribe, kems my brother Walter. *He* went ter school; kin read, write, an' cipher; he 's been taught ez much ez any man ez ever held the office he axes ter be 'lected ter, an' air thoroughly competent. Fac' is, gentlemen, thar 's nothin' lef' ter show fur the humble 'Fambly' Mr. Markham 's be'n tellin' 'bout, but me. I never went ter school, 'ceptin' in yer fields. I l'arned ter cure hides, an' temper steel, an' shoe horse-critters, so that pot mought be kep' a-b'ilin', an' 'Fambly' mought dine accordin' to thar humble way in them very humble days that somehow, gentlemen, I ain't got an' can't git the grace ter be 'shamed of yit."

He paused abruptly as he concluded the recital of his speech, and wiped his face with the back of his hand. "I wisht ye could hev hearn them men cheer. They jes' hollered tharse'fs hoarse. They shuck hands till they mighty nigh yanked my arm out'n its socket." With the recollection, he rubbed his right arm with a gesture of pain.

Something there was in the account of this ovation that smote upon the younger brother's sense of values, and he hastened to take possession of it.

"Oh, I knowed I war powerful pop'lar in the Sycamore Gap deestric'," he said, dropping

his lowering manner, that had somehow been perceptible in the darkness, and wagging his head from side to side with a gesture of great security in the affections of Sycamore Gap. "Sycamore Gap 's all right, I know; I 'll poll a big majority thar, sure."

"I reckon ye will; but I warn't so sure o' that at fust," replied the elder. "They 'peared ter me at fust ter be sorter set ag'in us — leastwise *me*, though arter a while I could hardly git away from 'em, they war so durned friendly."

Walter cast a keen look upon him; but he evidently spoke from his simple heart, and was all unaware that he was personally the source of this sudden popularity in Sycamore Gap — his magnetism, his unconscious eloquence, and his character as shown in the simple and forlorn annals of "Fambly." And yet he was not crudely unthinking. He perceived the incongruity of his brother's successive standpoints.

"I dunno how ye kin purtend ter be so allfired sure o' Sycamore Gap," he said suddenly. "'Tain't five minutes sence ye war 'lowin' ez pore folks could n't git 'lected ter office, an' ye wished ye hed hed nothin' ter do with sech, an' 't war me ez hed jes' pushed an' boosted ye inter it."

The resources of subterfuge are well-nigh

limitless. Walter Hoxon was an adept in utilizing them. He had seen a warning in the skies, and it had struck terror and discouragement to his heart; but not to his political prospects had he felt its application. Other schemes, deeper, treacherous, secret, seemed menaced, and his conscience, or that endowment to quake with the fear of requital that answers for conscience in some ill-developed souls, was set astir. Nevertheless, the election might suffice as scapegoat.

"Look a-yander, Justus," he said suddenly, pointing with the muzzle of his gun at the brilliant wayfarer of the skies, as if he might in another moment essay a shot. "That thar critter means mischief, sure ez ye air born."

The other stepped back a pace or two, and lifted his head to look.

"The comic?" he demanded. Walter's silence seemed assent. "Laws-a-massy, ye tomfool," Justus cried, "let it be a sign ter them ez run ag'in' ye! Count the comic in like a qualified voter — it kem hyar on account o' the incumbent's incompetence in office. Signs! Rolf Quigley is sign enough, — if ye want signs in 'lections, — with money, an' frien's, an' a term of office, an' the reg'lar nominee o' the party, an' ye jes' an independent candidate. No star a-waggin' a tale aroun' the sky air

haffen ez dangerous ter yer 'lection ez him. An' he ain't lookin' at no comic! He looked this evenin' like he 'd put his finger in his mouth in one more minute, plumb 'shamed ter his boot-sole o' the things Markham hed said. An' Markham he kem up ter me before a crowd o' fellers, an' says, says he: 'Mr. Hoxon, I meant no reflections on yer fambly in alludin' ter its poverty, an' I honor ye fur yer lifelong exertions in its behalf. I take pride, sir, in makin' this apology.' An' I says: 'I be a' illit'rate, humble man, Mr. Markham; but I will venture the liberty to tell ye ez ye mought take mo' pride in givin' no occasion fur apologies ter poverty.' Them fellers standin' aroun' jes' laffed. I knowed he did n't mean a word he said then, but war jes' slickin' over the things he *hed* said on Quigley's account, kase the crowd seemed ter favor me. I say, comic! Let Rolf Quigley take the comic fur a sign."

It is easy to pluck up fears that have no root. "Oh, I be goin' ter 'lectioneer all the same ez ever. Whar 's the nex' place we air bound fur?"

Walter put his hand on his brother's shoulder as he asked the question, and in the eager unfolding of plans and possibilities the two, as Justus talked, made their way along the deer-path beside the salt lick, leaving the stars coldly

glittering on the ripples, with that wonderful streak of white fire reflected among them; leaving, too, the vaguely whispering woods, communing with the wind as it came and went; reaching the slope of the mountain at last, where was perched, amid sterile fields and humble garden-patch, the little cabin in which "Fambly" had struggled through its forlorn youth to better days.

The door was closed after this. A padlock knocked against it when the wind blew, as if spuriously announcing a visitor. The deceit failed of effect, for there was no inmate left, and the freakish gust could only twirl the lock anew, and go swirling down the road with a rout of dust in a witches' dance behind it. The passers-by took note of the deserted aspect of things, and knew that the brothers were absent electioneering, and wondered vaguely what the chances might be. This passing was somewhat more frequent than was normal along the road; for when the mists that had hung about the mountains persistently during a warm, clammy, wet season had withdrawn suddenly, and one night revealed for the first time the comet fairly ablaze in the sky, a desire to hear what was said and known about it at the Cross-Roads and the settlement and the blacksmith shop took posses-

sion of the denizens of the region, and the coteries of amateur astronomers at these centres were added to daily. Some remembered a comet or two in past times, and if the deponent were advanced in years his hearers were given to understand that the present luminary could n't hold a tallow dip to the incandescent terrors he recollected. There were utilitarian souls who were disquieted about the crops, and anxiously examined growing ears of corn, expecting to find the comet's influence tucked away in the husks. Some looked for the end of the world; those most obviously and determinedly pious took, it might seem, a certain unfraternal joy in the contrast of their superior forethought, in being prepared for the day of doom, with the uncovenanted estate of the non-professor. A revival broke out at New Bethel; the number of mourners grew in proportion as the comet got bigger night by night. Small wonder that as evening drew slowly on, and the flaring, assertive, red west gradually paled, and the ranges began to lose semblance and symmetry in the dusk, and the river gloomed benighted in the vague circuit of its course, and a lonely star slipped into the sky, darkening, too, till, rank after rank, and phalanx after phalanx, all the splendid armament of night had mustered, with that great, glamourous gui-

don in the midst — small wonder that the ignorant mountaineer looked up at the unaccustomed thing to mark it there, and fear smote his heart.

At these times certain of the little sequestered households far among the wooded ranges got them within their doors, as if to place between them and the uncanny invader of the night, and the threatening influences rife in the very atmosphere, all the simple habitudes of home. The hearthstone seemed safest, the door a barrier, the home circle a guard. Others spent the nocturnal hours in the dooryard or on the porch, marking the march of the constellations, and filling the time with vague speculations, or retailing dreadful rumors of strange happenings in the neighboring coves, and wild stories of turmoil and misfortune that comets had wrought years ago.

It was at one of these makeshift observatories that Justus Hoxon stopped the first evening after his electioneering tour in the interest of his brother. The weather had turned hot and fair; a drought, a set-off to the surplusage of recent rain, was in progress; the dooryard on the high slope of the mountain, apart from its availability for the surveillance of any eccentric doings of the comet, was an acceptable lounging-place for the sake of the air, the dew, the

hope of a vagrant breeze, and, more than all, the ample "elbow-room" which it offered the rest of the family while he talked with Theodosia Blakely. The rest of the family — unwelcome wights! — were not disposed to make their existence obtrusive; on the contrary, they did much to further his wishes, even to the sacrifice of personal predilection. Mrs. Blakely, her arms befloured, her hands in the dough, had observed him at the gate, while she stood at the biscuit-block in the shed-room, and although pining to rush forth and ask the latest news from the settlement and the comet, she only called out in a husky undertone: "'Dosia, 'Dosia, yander's Justus a-kemin' in the gate! Put on yer white apern, chile."

Because she had been adjured to put on her white apron, Theodosia did not put it on. She advanced to the window, about which grew, with its graceful habit, a hop-vine. A little slanting roof was above the lintel, a mere board or so, with a few warped shingles; but it made a gentle shadow, and Theodosia thought few men besides the one at the gate would have failed to see her there. He lingered a little, turning back to glance over the landscape, and then he deflected his course toward a rough bench that was placed in a corner of the rail fence, threw himself upon it, and fanned himself with his broad-brimmed hat.

"The insurance o' the critter! I'm a mind ter leave ye a-settin' thar by yerse'f till ye be wore out waitin'," she muttered.

She hesitated a moment, then took her sunbonnet and went out to meet him.

The scene was like some great painting, with this corner in the foreground left unfinished, so minute was the detail of the distance, so elaborate and perfect the coloring of the curves of purple, and amethyst, and blue mountains afar off, rising in tiers about the cup-shaped valley. Above it hung a tawny tissue of haze, surcharged with a deeply red, vinous splendor, as if spilled from the stirrup-cup of the departing sun. He was already out of sight, spurring along unknown ways. The sky was yellow here and amber there, and a pearly flake, its only cloud, glittered white in the midst. Up the hither slope the various green of the pine and the poplar, the sycamore and the sweet-gum, was keenly differentiated, but where the rail fence drew the line of demarkation, Art seemed to fail.

A crude wash of ochre had apparently sufficed for the dooryard; no weed grew here, no twig. It was tramped firm and hard by the feet of cow, and horse, and the peripatetic children, and poultry. The cabin was drawn in with careless angles and lines by a mere stroke or

two; and surely no painter, no builder save the utilitarian backwoodsman, would have left it with no relief of trees behind it, no vineyard, no garden, no orchard, no background, naught; in its gaunt simplicity and ugliness it stood against its own ill-tended fields flattening away in the rear.

Such as it was, however, it satisfied all of Justus Hoxon's sense of the appropriate and the picturesque when Theodosia Blakely stepped out from the door and came slowly to meet him. The painter's art, if she were to be esteemed part of the foreground, might have seemed redeemed in her. Her dress was of light blue homespun; her sunbonnet of deep red calico, pushed back, showed her dark brown hair waving upward in heavy undulations from her brow, her large blue eyes with their thick black lashes, her rich brunette complexion, her delicate red lips cut in fine lines, and the gleam of her teeth as she smiled. She had a string of opaque white, wax-like beads around the neck of her dress, and the contrast of the pearly whiteness of the bauble with the creamy whiteness and softness of her throat was marked with much finish. Her figure was hardly of medium height, and, despite the suppleness of youth, as "plump as a partridge," according to the familiar saying. The clear iris of her eyes gave an impres-

sion of quick shifting, and by them one could see her mood change as she approached.

She looked at him intently, speculatively, a sort of doubtful curiosity furtively suggested in her expression; but there was naught subtle or covert in the gaze that met hers — naught but the frankest pleasure and happiness. He did not move, as she advanced, nor offer formal greeting; he only smiled, secure, content, restful, as she came up and sat down on the end of the bench. The children, playing noisily in the back yard on the wood-pile, paused for a moment to gaze with callow interest at them; but the spectacle of "The'dosia's sweetheart" was too familiar to be of more than fleeting diversion, and they resorted once more to their pastime. Mrs. Blakely too, who with rolling-pin in her hand had turned to gaze out of the window, went back to rolling out the dough vigorously, with only the muttered comment, "Wish The'dosia did n't know how much I 'd like that man fur a son-in-law, then she 'd be willin' ter like him better herse'f."

He was unconscious of them all, as he leaned his elbow on the projecting rails of the fence at their intersection close at hand.

"Hev ye hed yer health, The'dosia?" he said.

"Don't I look like it?" she replied laughingly.

There was something both of cordiality and coquetry in her manner. Her large eyes narrowed as she laughed, and albeit they glittered between their closing lids, the expression was not pleasant. Levity did not become her.

"Yes, ye do," he said seriously. "Ye 'pear ter be real thrivin' an' peart an' healthy."

His look, his words, were charged with no sort of recognition or value of her beauty: clearly her challenge had fallen to the ground unnoticed.

"He 'd like me jes' ez well ef I war all pitted up with the smallpox, or ez freckled ez a tur-r-key-aig," she thought, flushing with irritation.

Beauty is jealous of preëminence, and would fain have precedence even of love. She could take no sort of satisfaction in a captive that her bright eyes had not shackled. Somehow this love seemed to flout, to diminish, her attractions. It was like an accident. She could account for his subjection on no other grounds. As she sat silent, grave enough now and very beautiful, gazing askance and troubled upon him, he went on: —

"I war so oneasy an' beset lest suthin' hed happened on the mounting, whilst I war away, ter trouble you-uns or some o' yer folks. I never hed time ter study much 'bout sech in the day, but I dreamt 'bout ye in the night, an'

all night," — he laughed a little, — "all sort'n mixed up things. I got ter be a plumb Joseph fur readin' dreams — only I could read the same one forty diff'rent ways, an' every way made me a leetle mo' oneasy than the t'other one. I s'pose ye hev been perlite enough ter miss me a leetle," he concluded.

She flashed her great eyes at him with a pretended stare of surprise. "My — no!" she exclaimed. "We-uns hev hed the comet ter keep us comp'ny — we ain't missed nobody!"

He laughed a little, as at a repartee, and then went on: —

"Waal, the comic war a-cuttin' a pretty showy figger down yander at Colbury. 'Stonishin' how much store folks do 'pear ter set on it! They hed rigged up some sort'n peepin'-glass in the Court-House yard, an' thar war mighty nigh the whole town a-squinchin' up one eye ter examinate the consarn through it — all the court off'cers, 'torney-gin'ral, an' sech, an' old Doctor Kane an' Jedge Peters, besides a whole passel o' ginerality folks. They 'lowed the glass made it 'pear bigger."

"Did it?" she asked, with sudden interest.

"Bless yer soul, chile, *I* did n't hev time ter waste on it. Jedge Peters he beckoned ter me, an' 'lowed he 'd interjuce me ter it; but I 'lowed the comic outside war plenty big enough

fur me. 'Jedge,' I says, 'my mission hyar air ter make onnecessary things seem *small*, not magnified. That 's why I 'm continually belittlin' Rolf Quigley. Wat kin go on lookin' cross-eyed at the stars, ef so minded, but I be bound ter tend ter the 'lection.' An' the jedge laffed and says: 'Justus, nex' time I want ter git 'lected ter office, I 'm goin' ter git *ye* ter boost me in. Ye hev got it a sight mo' at heart than yer brother.' Fur thar war Wat, all twisted up at the small e-end o' the tellingscope, purtendin' ter be on mighty close terms with the comic, though lots o' other men said it jes' dazed thar eyes, an' they could n't see *nuthin'* through it, an' mighty leetle arterward through sightin' so long one-eyed."

"Waal, how 's the prospects fur the 'lection?" she asked.

"Fine! Fine!" he answered with gusto. "Folks all be so frien'ly everywhar ter we-uns."

He leaned his shoulder suddenly back against the rough rails of the fence. His hat was in his hand. His hair, fine, thin, chestnut-brown, and closely clinging about his narrow head, was thrown back from his forehead. His clear blue eyes were turned upward, with the light of reminiscence slowly dawning in them. It may have been the reflection of the dazzling flake of cloud, it may have been some mental illumination, but

a sort of radiance was breaking over the keen, irregular lines of his features, and a flush other than the floridity of a naturally fair complexion was upon his thin cheek and hollow temple.

"O The'dosia," he cried, "I can't holp thinkin', hevin' so many frien's nowadays, — whenst it 's 'Hail!' hyar, an' 'Howdy!' thar, an' a clap on the shoulder ter the east, an' a 'How 's yer health?' ter the west, an' a hand-shake ter the north, an' 'Take a drink?' ter the south, from one e-end o' the county ter the t'other, — how I fared whenst I hed jes' *one* frien' in the worl', an' that war yer mother! An' how she looked the fust day she stood in the door o' my cabin up thar — kem ter nuss Elmiry through that spell she hed o' the scarlet fever. An' arterward she says ter me: 'Ye do manage s'prisin', Justus; an' I be goin' ter save ye some gyardin seed out'n my patch this year, an' ef ye 'll plough my patch I 'll loan ye my horse-critter ter plough your'n. An' the gals kin kem an' l'arn ter sew an' churn, an' sech, long o' 'Dosia.' An' how they loved ye, 'Dosia — special Elmiry!"

His eyes filled with sudden tears. They did not fall; they were absorbed somehow as he resumed: —

"Sech a superflu'ty o' frien's nowadays! Ef 't warn't they 'd count fur all they 're wuth in

the ballot-box, I 'd hev no use fur 'em. I kin sca'cely 'member thar names. But then I hed jes' *one* — jes' *one* in all the worl' — yer mother! Bless her soul!" he concluded enthusiastically.

He was still and reflective for a moment. Then he made a motion as though he would take one of Theodosia's hands. But she clasped both of them demurely behind her.

"I don't hold hands with no man ez blesses another 'oman's soul by the hour," she said, with an affectation of primness.

There may have been something more serious in her playful rebuff, but in the serenity of his perfect security he did not feel it or gauge its depth.

A glimpse of her mother at the window added its suggestion — a lean, sallow, lined face, full of anxious furrows, with a rim of scanty gray-streaked hair about the brow, with spectacles perched above, and beneath the flabby jaw a scraggy, wrinkled neck.

"An' she 's so powerful pretty!" Theodosia exclaimed, with an irreverent burst of laughter, "I don't wonder ye feel obligated ter bless her soul."

"She 'pears plumb beautiful to my mind," he said unequivocally, — "all of a piece with her beautiful life."

Theodosia was suddenly grave, angered into a secret, sullen irritation. These were words she loved for herself: it was but lately she had learned so to prize them. Her eyes were as bright as a deer's! Had not some one protested this, with a good round rural oath as attestation? Her hair on the back of her head, and its shape to the nape of her neck, were so beautiful — she had never seen it: how could she say it was n't? Her chin and her throat — well, if people could think snow was a prettier white, he would n't give much for *their* head-stuffin'. And her blush! her blush! It was her own fault. He would not have taken another kiss if she had not blushed so at the first that he must needs again see her cheek glow like the wild rose.

These were echoes of a love-making that had lately taken hold of her heart, that had grown insistently sweet and dear to her, that had established its sway impetuously, tyrannically, over her life, that had caused her to seem more to herself, and as if she were infinitely more to her new lover.

She wondered how she could ever have even tolerated this dullard, with his slow, measured preference, his unquestioning security of her heart, his doltish credulity in her and her promise, his humble gratitude to her mother, — who had often enough, in good sooth, got full value

in return for aught she gave, — who appeared "beautiful" to his mind. She broke forth abruptly, her cheeks flushing, her eyes brave and bright, the subject nearest her heart on her lips, in the sudden influx of courage set astir by the mere contemplation of it.

"Waal now, tell 'bout Wat — how he enj'ys bein' a candidate, an' sech." Then, with a tremor because of her temerity: "I have hearn o' that thar beautisome old 'oman a time or two afore, but Wat ez a candidate air sorter fraish an' new."

He turned his clear, unsuspicious eyes upon her. He had replaced his wide wool hat on his head, and he leaned forward, resting his cheek on his hand and his elbow on his knee. He aimlessly flicked his long spurred boot, as he talked, with a willow wand which he carried in lieu of horsewhip.

"Waal, Wat is some similar ter a balky horse. He don't seem ter sense a word I say, nor ter be willin' ter do a thing I advise, nor even ter take heart o' grace 'bout bein' 'lected, till we gets out 'mongst folks, an' *thar* handshakin's and frien'liness seems ter hearten up the critter. I hev jes' hed ter baig an' baig, an' plead an' plead, with that boy 'bout this an' that an' t'other, till I would n't go through ag'in what I *hev* been through ter git 'lected

doorkeeper o' heaven. But," with a sudden change of tone and a flush of pride, "The'dosia, ye dunno what a' all-fired pretty speaker Wat hev got ter be. Jes' stan's up ez straight an' smilin' afore all the crowd, an' jes' tells off his p'ints, one, two, three, ez nip! An' the crowd always cheers an' cheers — jes' bawls itse'f hoarse. Whenever thar 's a chance ter speak, Wat jes' leaves them t'other candidates nowhar."

Ah, Theodosia's beauty well deserved the guerdon of sweet words. She might have been pictured as a thirsting Hebe. She had a look of quaffing some cup of nectar, still craving its depths, so immediate a joy, so intense a light, were in her widely open eyes; her lips were parted; the spray of blackberry leaves that she held near her cheek did not quiver, so had her interest petrified every muscle. She was leaning slightly forward; her red sunbonnet had fallen to the ground, and the wind tossed her dark brown hair till the heavy masses, with their curling ends disheveled, showed tendrils of golden hue. Her round, plump arm was like ivory. The torn sleeve fell away to the elbow, and her mother, glancing out of the window, took remorseful heed of it, and wished that she herself had set a stitch in it.

"The'dosia shows herself so back'ard 'bout mendin', an' sech — she air enough ter skeer

any man away. An' Justus knows jes' what sech laziness means. Kin mend clothes hisse'f ez good ez the nex' one, an' useter do it too, strong an' taut, with a double thread, whenst the fambly war leetle chil'n an' gin ter bustin' out'n thar gear."

But Justus took no note of the significance of the torn sleeve.

"Why, 'Dosia," he went on, "everybody 'lowed ez Wat's speeches seemed ter sense what the people wanted ter hear. Him an' me we 'd talk it over the night before, an' Wat he 'd write down what we said on paper an' mem'rize it; an' the nex' day, why, folks that would n't hev nuthin' ter say ter him afore he spoke would be jes' aidgin' up through the crowd ter git ter shake han's with him."

She smiled with delight at the picture. If it were sweet to him to praise, how sweet it was to her to listen! "Tell on!" she said softly.

Her interest flattered him; it enriched the reminiscence, dear though his memory held it. He had no doubt as to the unity of feeling with which they both regarded the incidents he chronicled. He went on with the certainty of responsive sentiment, the ease, the serenity of a man who opens his heart to the woman he loves.

"Why, 'Dosia," he said, "often, often if it

hed n't been fur the folks, I could hev run up an' dragged him off'n the rostrum an' hugged him fur pride, he looked so han'some an' spoke so peart! An' ter think 't war jes' our leetle Wat — the Fambly's leetle Wat — growed up ter be sech a man! Ye 'll laff at me — other folks did — whenst I tell ye that ag'in an' ag'in I jes' cotch' myse'f cheerin' with the loudest. I could n't holp it."

"He 'll be 'lected, Justus?" she breathlessly inquired, and yet imperatively, as if, even though she asked, she would brook no denial.

"Oh, they all say thar 's no doubt — no doubt at all."

She drew a long breath of contentment, of pleasure. She leaned back, silent and reflective, against the rail fence behind the bench, her eyes fixed, absorbed, following the outline of other scenes than the one before them, which indeed left no impression upon her senses, scenes to come, slowly shaping the future. All trace of the red glow of the sun had departed from the landscape. No heavy, light-absorbing, sad-hued tapestries could wear so deep a purple, such sombre suggestions of green, as the circling mountains had now assumed: they were not black, and yet such depths of darkness hardly comported with the idea of color. The neutral tints of the sky were graded more definitely,

with purer transparency, because of the contrast. The fine grays were akin to pearl color, to lavender, even, in approaching the zenith, to the palest of blue — so pale that the white glitter of a star alternately appeared and was lost again in its tranquil inexpressiveness. The river seemed suddenly awake; its voice was lifted loud upon the evening air, a rhythmic song without words. The frogs chanted by the waterside. Fireflies here and there quivered palely over the flat cornfields at the back of the house. There was a light within, dully showing through the vines at the window.

"An' then, 'Dosia," said Justus softly, "when the 'lection is over, it 's time fur ye an' me ter git married."

She roused herself with an obvious effort, and looked uncomprehendingly at him for a moment, as if she hardly heard.

"The las' one o' Fambly will be off my han's then. Fambly will hev been pervided fur — every one, Wat an' all. I hev done my bes' fur Fambly, an' I dunno but I hev earned the right ter think some fur myse'f now."

He would not perhaps have arrogated so much, except to the woman by whom he believed himself beloved. She said nothing, and he went on slowly, lingering upon the words as if he loved the prospect they conjured up.

"We-uns will hev the gyardin an' orchard, an' pastur' an' woods-lot an' fields, ter tend ter, an' the cows an' bees, an' the mare an' filly, an' peegs an' poultry, ter look arter. An' the house air all tight, the roof an' all in good repair, an' we-uns will have it all ter ourselves."

She turned upon him with sudden interest.

"What will kem o' Wat?"

"Oh, he mus' live in town whilst sher'ff, bein' off'cer o' the court an' official keeper o' jail, though he kin app'int a jailer."

"Live in Colbury!" she exclaimed in wonderment.

Justus laughed in triumph. "Oh, I tell ye, Wat 's 'way up in the pictur's! He 'll be a reg'lar town man 'fore long, I reckon, dandified an' sniptious ez the nex' one, marryin' one o' them finified town gals ez wear straw hats stiddier sunbonnets, — though they *do* look ter be about ez flimsy an' no-'count cattle ez any I ever see," the sterling rural standpoint modifying his relish of Walter's frivolous worldly opportunities.

She tossed her head in defiance of some sudden unspoken thought. As she lifted her eyes, fired by pride, she saw the comet all a-glitter in the darkening sky.

She hardly knew that he had seized her hand; but his importunity must be answered.

"D'rec'ly after the 'lection — 'lection day, 'Dosia?" he urged.

"Ain't ye got no jedgmint," she temporized, laughing unmirthfully, "axin' sech a question ez that under that onlucky comet!"

"I hev been waitin' so long, 'Dosia!"

It was the first suggestion of complaint she had ever heard from him.

"Then ye air used ter waitin', an' 't won't kill ye ter wait a leetle longer. I 'll let ye know 'lection day."

II.

It was a hot day in the little valley town, the first Thursday in August, the climax of a drought, with the sun blazing down from dawn to dusk, and not a cloud, not a vagrant mist, not even the stir of the impalpable ether, to interpose. The mountains that rimmed the horizon all around Colbury shimmered azure, through the heated air. No wind came down those darker indentations that marked ravines. A dazzling, stifling stillness reigned; yet now and again an eddying cloud of dust would spring up along the streets, and go whirling up-hill and down, pausing suddenly, and settling upon the overgrown shrubbery in the pretty village yards, or on white curtains hanging motionless at the windows of large, old-fashioned frame houses. Even

the shade was hot with a sort of closeness unknown in the open air, yet as it dwindled to noontide proportions some alleviation seemed withdrawn; and though the mercury marked no change, all the senses welcomed the post-meridian lengthening of the images of bough and bole beneath the trees, and the fantastic architecture of the shadows of chimney and gable and dormer-window, elongated out of drawing, stretching across the grassy streets and ample gardens. There among the grape trellises, and raspberry bushes, and peach and cherry trees, the locusts chirred and chirred a tireless, vibrating panegyric on hot weather. The birds were hushed; sometimes under a clump of matted leaves one of the feathered gentry might be seen with wings well held out from his panting sides. The beautiful green beetle, here called the "June-bug," hovered about the beds of thyme, its jeweled, enameled green body and its silver gauze wings flashing in the sun, although June was far down the revolving year. Blue and lilac lizards basked in the garden walks, which were cracked by the heat. Little stir was in the streets; the languid business of a small town was transacted if absolute need required, and postponed if a morrow would admit of contemplation. The voters slowly repaired to the polls with a sense of martyrdom in the cause of party,

and the election was passing off in a most orderly fashion, there being no residuum of energy in the baking town to render it disorderly or unseemly. Often not a human being was to be seen, coming or going.

To Theodosia it was all vastly different from the picture she had projected of Colbury with an election in progress. In interest, movement, populousness, it did not compare with a county-court day, which her imagination had multiplied when she estimated the relative importance of the events. She had made no allowance for the absence of the country people, specially wont to visit the town when the quarterly court was in session, but now all dutifully in place voting in their own remote districts. The dust, the suffocating heat, the stale, vapid air, the indescribable sense of a lower level — all these affected her like a veritable burden, accustomed as she was to the light and rare mountain breeze, to the tempered sun, the mist, and the cloud. The new and untried conditions of town life trammeled and constrained her. She had a certain pride, and she feared she continually offended against the canons of metropolitan taste. In every passing face she saw surprise, and she fancied contempt. In every casual laugh she heard ridicule. Her brain was a turmoil of conflicting anxieties, hopes, resolutions, and in addition

these external demands upon her attention served to intensify her absorbing emotions and to irritate her nerves rather than to divert or soothe them. She had escaped from the relative at whose house she was making a visit, craftily timed to include election day, on the plea that she wished to see something of the town. "Ye don't live up on the mounting, Cousin Anice, 'mongst the deer, an' b'ar, an' fox, like me," she had said jestingly, "or ye 'd want ter view all the town ye kin." And once outside the shabby little palings, she returned no more for hours.

Along the scorching streets she wandered, debating within herself anxious questions which, she felt, affected all her future, and unfitting herself still further to reach that just and wise conclusion she desired to compass. She could not altogether abstract her mind, despite the interests which she had at stake. She noticed that her unaccustomed feet stumbled over the flag-stones of the pavement — "Fit fur nothin' but followin' the plough!" she muttered in irritation. She hesitated at the door of a store, then sidled sheepishly in, tearing her dress on a nail in a barrel set well in the corner and out of the way.

But while looking over the pile of goods which she had neither the wish nor the money to pur-

chase, she could have sunk with shame with the sudden thought that perhaps it was not the vogue in Colbury to keep a clerk actively afoot to while away the idle time of a desperately idle woman. She could not at once decide how she might best extricate herself, and for considerable time the empty show of an impending purchase went on.

"I 'll — I 'll kem an' see 'bout'n it ter-morrer," she faltered at last. "Much obleeged."

"No trouble to show goods," said the martyr of the counter, politely. In truth he had in the course of his career shown them as futilely to women who were much older and far, far uglier, and contemplating purchase as remotely.

She went out scarlet, slow, tremulous, and walking close into the wall like an apprehensive cat, looking now and again over her shoulder. She wondered if he laughed when he was alone.

Her shadow was long now as it preceded her down the street, lank, awkward, clumsy. She took note of the late hour which it intimated, and followed the extravagant, lurching caricature of herself to her cousin's house, a little unpainted, humble building set far back in the yard, against the good time coming when a more ornate structure should be prefixed. The good time seemed still a long way off. Her cousin's ironing-board was on the porch, and

presently a lean, elderly, active woman whisked out, her flat-iron in her hand.

"Cousin Anice," called Theodosia from the gate, "how 's the 'lection turned out?"

Cousin Anice paused to put her finger in her mouth; thus moistened, she touched it to the flat-iron, which hissed smartly, and which she applied then to the apron on the board.

"Laws-a-massy! chile, the polls is jes' closed, an' all the country deestric's ter be hearn from. We won't know till ter-morrer — till late ter-night, nohow."

Theodosia leaned against the gate. How could she wait! How could she endure the suspense! She thought of Justus, and of her promise to fix the date of the wedding on election day, but only as an additional factor of trouble in her own anxiety and indecision.

"Wat 's been hyar ez cross ez two sticks," said Mrs. Elmer. She paused to hold up the apron, exquisitely white, and sheer, and stiff, and to gaze with critical professional eyes upon it; she was what is known as a "beautiful washer and ironer," although otherwise not comely. "Wat's beat plumb out o' sight, ef the truth war knowed, I reckon. He 'lows he 's powerful 'feared. Ef 't war Justus, now, *he 'd* hev been 'lected sure. Justus is a mighty s'perior man; pity he never hed no eddication.

He could hev done anything — sharp ez a brier. Yes; Wat 's beat, I reckon."

In the instant Theodosia's heart sank. But she turned from the palings, and sauntered resolutely on. It well behooved her to take counsel with herself. "I mought hev made a turr'ble, turr'ble mistake," she muttered. She was sensible of a sharp pang pervading her consciousness. Nevertheless, judgment clamored for recognition.

"Everybody gins Justus a good name, better 'n Wat," she argued. "An' ef Wat *ain't* 'lected" —

She walked down the street with a freer step, her head lifted, her self-respect more secure. With the possible collapse of her prospect of living in Colbury, and her ambition to adjust herself to the exigent demands of its more ornate civilization, her natural untrained grace was returning to her. She felt that she was certainly stylish enough for the hills, where she was likely to live all her days, and with this realization she quite unconsciously seemed easy enough, unconstrained enough, graceful enough, to pass muster in a wider sphere. Her heart was beating placidly now with the casting away of this new expectation that had made all its pulses tense. The still air was cooler, or at least darker. A roseate suffusion was in the sky,

although a star twinkled there. More people were in the streets; doors and windows were open, and faces appeared now and again among the vines and curtains. As she hesitated on the street corner, two young girls in white dresses and with fair hair passed her. She watched them with darkening brow as they drew hastily together, and suddenly she overheard the half-smothered exclamation which had a dozen times to-day barely escaped her ears.

"What a pretty, pretty girl! Oh, my! how pretty, how pretty!"

Theodosia stood like one bewitched; a light like the illumination of jewels was in her sapphire eyes; the color surged to her cheek; she lifted up her head on its round, white throat; her lips curved. "Oh, poor fool!" she thought in pity for herself, for this was what the Colbury people had been saying all day in their swift, recurrent glances, their half-masked asides, their furtive turning to look after her. And she — to have given herself a day of such keen misery unconscious of their covert encomiums!

"I live up thar in the wilderness till I jes' don't sense nothin'," she said.

All the wilting prospects of life were refreshed as a flower in the perfumed dew-fall. She felt competent, able to cope with them all; her restored self-confidence pervaded her whole entity,

spiritual and material. She walked back with an elastic step, a breezy, debonair manner, and she met Justus Hoxon at the gate of her cousin's yard with a jaunty assurance, and with all the charm of her rich beauty in the ascendant.

He would fain have detained her in the twilight. "What 's that ye promised to tell me 'lection day?"

"I 'lowed the day Wat war 'lected," she temporized, laying her hand on the gate, which his stronger hand kept still closed.

"Waal, this is the day Wat is 'lected."

She drew back. Even in the dim light he could see her blue eyes widening with inquiry as she looked at him.

"I 'lowed the returns war n't all in," she said doubtfully.

"They ain't, but enough hev kem in sence the polls closed ter gin him a thumpin' majority. He 's safe." The tense ring of triumph was in his voice.

The scene was swimming before her; she was dazed by the sudden alternations of hope and despair, of decision and counter-decision, by the seeming instability of all this. Once more she thought, in a tremble, and with a difference, of the mistake she might have made. She held to the gate to keep her feet, no longer to open it.

"What did ye promise ter tell me 'lection

day?" he demanded once more, clasping her hand as it lay on the palings.

"'Lection day?" she said with a forced laugh — "'t ain't e-ended yit. An'," with a sudden resolution of effecting a diversion — "afore it *is* e-ended I want ter git a peep through that thar thing they call a tellingscope, ef they let women folks look through it."

He was instantly intent.

"Laws-a-massy, yes!" he exclaimed. "I seen Mis' Dr. Kane and Mis' Jedge Peters, an' thar darters, an' a whole passel o' women folks over thar one night las' week. The young folks jes' amble up an' down the court-house yard, bein' moonlight, like a lot o' young colts showin' thar paces. An' even ef they ain't thar ter-night, I'll take ye over thar arter supper, with yer cousin Anice ter keep ye in countenance."

But after supper there was a sufficiency of fluttering white dresses astir in the court-house yard, and now and again crossing the wide, ill-paved street thither, to warrant Theodosia in dispensing with her cousin's company, much to that sophisticated worthy's relief.

"I hev seen all Colbury 's got ter show," she said with sated pride. "An' bein' ez I hev hed a hard day's ironin', I hev got a stitch in my side."

"I 'd onderstan' that better if ye hed hed a

hard day's sewin'," said Justus. He was in high feather, eager, jubilant, drinking in all the rich and subtle flavors of success with the gusto of personal triumph.

"He air prouder 'n Wat," more than one observer opined.

There was another fine exhibition of pride on display in the court-house yard that evening. One might have inferred that Dr. Kane had made the comet, from his satisfaction in its proportions, his accurate knowledge and exposition of its history, its previous appearances, and when its coming again might be expected. He was the principal physician of the place, and the little telescope was his property, and he had thus generously loaned it to the public with the hope of illuminating the general ignorance by a nearer view of the starry heavens, while it served his own and his neighbors' interest in the nightly progress of the great comet. Total destruction had been prophesied as the imminent fate of the telescope, but it had so far justified its owner's confidence in the promiscuous politeness of Kildeer County, and had been a source of infinite pleasure to the country folks from the coves and mountains, who had never before seen, nor in good sooth heard of, such an instrument. For weeks past almost all night curious groups took possession of it at intervals, and doubtless

it did much to enlarge their idea of science and knowledge of celestial phenomena, for often Dr. Kane's idle humor induced him to stand by and explain the various theories touching comets, — their velocity, their substance or lack of substance, their recurrence, their status in the astral economy, — and cognate themes. As he was a man of very considerable reading and mental qualifications, of some means for the indulgence of his taste, and a good deal of leisure, the synopsis of astronomical science presented in the successive expositions was very well worth listening to, especially by the more ignorant of the community, who were thus enlightened as to facts hitherto foreign even to their wildest imaginings.

But following hard on every benefaction is the trail of ingratitude, and certain of the irreverent in the crowd found a piquant zest in secret derision of the doctor, who sometimes did, in truth, present the air of a showman with a panorama. More especially was this the case when his enthusiasm waxed high, and his satisfaction in the glories of the comet partook of a positive personal pride.

"What 's he goin' ter do about it?" demanded one grinning rustic of another on the outskirts of the crowd.

"Put salt on its tail," responded his interlocutor.

Others affected to believe that the doctor was performing a great feat with the long bow, especially in the tremendous measurements of which he seemed singularly prodigal. A reference to the height of the mountains of the moon as compared with the neighboring ranges elicited a whispered hope that the roads were better there than those of the Great Smoky; and an inquiry concerning the probable fate of the comet provoked a speculation that when he was done with it he would sell it at public outcry to the highest bidder at the east door of the court-house.

Close about the stand, however, the crowd took on something of the demeanor of a literary society. Discussions were in order, questions asked and answered, authorities quoted and refuted: the other physician, who practiced much in consultation with Dr. Kane, two or three clergymen, several of the officers of the court, and a number of lawyers, all taking part. The more youthful members of the gathering affected the rôle of peripatetic philosophers, and sauntered to and fro, arm in arm, in the light of the waxing moon.

The big black shadows of the giant oaks were all dappled with silver as the beams pierced the foliage and fell to the ground below; only the cornice of the building threw an unbroken image,

massive and sombre, on the sward. The low clustering roofs of the town had a thin bluish haze hovering about them, and were all softly and blurringly imposed on the vaguely blue sky and the dim hills beyond. Among them a vertical silver line glinted, sharply metallic, — the steeple of a church. Here and there a yellow light gleamed from a lamp within a window. No sound came from the streets; all the life of the place seemed congregated here.

There was a continual succession of postulants to gaze through the telescope, some gravely curious, some stolidly iconoclastic and incredulous, others with covert levity, and still others, self-conscious, solicitous, secretly determined to affect to see all that other people could see, lest some subtle incapacity, some flagrant rusticity, be inferred from failure. These last were hasty observers, scarcely waiting to adjust the eye to the lens, fluttered, and prolific of inapt exclamations, which too often betrayed the superficial character of the investigation. To this class did Theodosia belong.

"Plumb beautiful!" she murmured under her breath, after a momentary contact of her dazzled eye with the brass rim of the telescope.

"Try ag'in, 'Dosia!" exclaimed Justus, aghast at this perfunctory dismissal of the comet, as she turned to go away.

She winced a little from his voice, clear, vibrant and urgent, for Justus had no solicitude concerning the superior canons of Colbury touching etiquette, and suffered none of her anxieties. She caught Dr. Kane's eyes fixed upon him as she moved hastily away, and then he came up beside Justus, who stood near the telescope.

"Let me explain the thing to you, Hoxon," he said. "Try a peep yourself."

Justus glanced after her. Walter had joined her — not so soon, however, but that she heard a half-suppressed criticism on her lover as he turned to the telescope and Dr. Kane's exposition.

"Pity he 's got no education — smart fellow, but can't even read and write."

"Smart" enough to be an apt pupil. The others pressed close around, listening to the measured voice of the physician and the quick, pertinent questions of the star-gazer.

It is as an open scroll, that magnificent, wonder-compelling cult of the skies, not the sealed book of other sciences. Since the days of the Chaldean, all men of receptive soul in solitary places, the sailor, the shepherd, the hunter, or the hermit, whether of the wilderness of nature or the isolation of crowds, have read there of the mystery of the infinite, of the order and symmetry of the plan of creation, of the proof of the

existence of a God, who controls the sweet influences of Pleiades and makes strong the bands of Orion. The unspeakable thought, the unformulated prayer, the poignant sense of individual littleness, of atomic unimportance, in the midst of the vast scheme of the universe, inform every eye, throb in every breast, whether it be of the savant, with all the appliances of invention to bring to his cheated senses the illusion of a slightly nearer approach, or of the half-civilized llanero of the tropic solitudes, whose knowledge suffices only to note the hour by the bending of the great Southern Cross. It is the heritage of all alike.

For Justus Hoxon, who had followed the slow march of the stars through many a year in the troubled watches of the night, when anxiety and foreboding could make no covenant with sleep, there was, in one sense, little to learn. He knew them all in their several seasons, the time of their rising, when they came to the meridian, and when they were engulfed in the west, till with another year they sparkled on the eastern rim of the sky. He listened to Dr. Kane's explanation of this with an air of acceptance, but he hardly heeded the detail of their distance from the earth and from one another — he knew that they were far, — and he shook his head over speculations as to their physical condition,

vegetation, and inhabitation. "Ye ain't got no sort o' means o' knowin' sech, Doctor," he said reprehensively, gauging the depths of the ignorance of the wise man.

He heard their names with alert interest, and repeated them swiftly after his mentor to set them in his memory. "By George!" he cried delightedly, "I hed no idee they hed names!"

And as the amateur astronomer, pleased with so responsive a glow, began the tracing of the fantastic imagery of the constellations, detailing the story of each vague similitude, he marked the sudden dawn of a certain enchantment in his interlocutor's mind, the first subtle experience of the delights of the ideal and the resources of fable. It exerted upon Dr. Kane a sort of fascinated interest, the observation of this earliest exploration of the realms of fancy by so keen and receptive an intelligence. The comet, the telescope, the crowd, were forgotten, as with Hoxon at his elbow he made the tour of the court-house yard, from point to point, wherever the best observation might be had of each separate sidereal etching on the deep blue. For a time the crowd casually watched them with a certain good-natured ridicule of their absorption, and the telescope maintained its interest to the successive wights who peered through at the comet still splendidly ablaze despite the

light of the gibbous moon. The ranks of young people promenaded up and down the brick walks and the grassy spaces. Elder gossips sat on the court-house steps, or stood in groups, and discussed the questions of the day. Gradually disintegration began. The clangor of the gate rose now and then as homeward-bound parties passed through, becoming constantly more frequent. Still the shifting back and forth of the thinning ranks of the peripatetic youth went on, and laughter and talk resounded from the court-house steps. At intervals the telescope was deserted; the motionless trees were bright with the moon and glossy with the dew. The voice of guard-dogs was now and again reverberated from the hills. The languid sense of a late hour had dulled the pulses, and when Justus Hoxon turned back to earth it was to an almost depopulated scene, the realization of the approach of midnight, and the sight of Theodosia sitting alone in the moonlight on the steps of the east door of the court-house, waiting for him with a touching patience, as it seemed to him at the moment.

"Air you-uns waitin' fur me, 'Dosia, all by yerse'f?" he demanded hastily, with a contrite intonation.

"I '*pear* to be all by myse'f," she said, with a playful feigning of uncertainty, glancing about

her. She gave a forced laugh, and the constraint in her tone struck his attention.

"I 'lowed ez Wat war with ye," he said apologetically. "Air ye ready ter go over ter yer cousin Anice's now?"

He was standing leaning against one of the columns of the portico, his face half in the shadow of his hat and half in the moonlight.

She sat still upon the steps, looking up at him, her upturned eyes taking an appealing expression from her lowly attitude. She was silent for a moment, as if at a loss. Then suddenly her eyes fell.

"'Pears ter me ter be right comical ter hev ter remind *ye* o' what *I* promised ter tell ye 'lection day," she said.

"Why, 'Dosia," he broke in vehemently, "I hev axed ye twice ter-day, an' I did n't ax ye jes' now 'kase ye hed been hyar so long alone, an' I wanted ter take ye ter yer cousin Anice's ef so be ye wanted ter go." He stopped for a moment. Then, with a change of tone, "Ye can't make out ez I hev been anything but hearty in lovin' ye — nearly all yer life long!" His voice rang out with a definite note of conviction, of assertion.

Reproach was an untenable ground. She desisted from the effort. Her eyes wandered down the street that lay shadowy with gable,

and dormer-window, and long chimneys, in sharp geometric figures in the moonshine, alternating with the deeper shadow of the trees. There were no lights save a twinkle here and there in an upper window.

A flush rose to his pale cheeks. His heart was beating fast with heavy presage. He hesitated to demand his fate at so untoward a moment. He took off his hat, mechanically fanning with its broad brim, and gazing about him at the slowly dulling splendor of the moonlight as the disk tended further and further toward the west. The stars were brightening gradually, and within the range of his vision flared the great comet, every moment the lustre of its white fire intensifying. He only saw; he did not note. His every faculty was concentrated on the girl's drawling voice as she began again, hesitating, and evidently at a loss.

"Waal, I hate ter tell ye, Justus, but I hev ter do it, an' I mought ez well the day that I promised ter set *the day*. It 's — it 's — *never!* I ain't goin' ter marry ye at all!"

He recoiled as from a blow. And yet he could not accept the fact.

"The'dosia," he said, "air ye mad with me 'kase ye 'low I forgot ye this evenin'?"

Theodosia had recovered her poise. Now that she had begun she felt suddenly fluent. It did

not accord with her estimate of her own attractions to dismiss a lover because he had forgotten her. She began to find a relish in the situation, and sought to adjust its details more accurately to her preferences.

"Justus, I know ye never furgot me fur one minute. I kin find no fault with yer likin' fur me."

She had never seen a stage. She had never heard of a theatre, but she was posing and playing a part as definitely as if it graced the boards.

He detected a certain spurious note in her voice. It bewildered him. He stared silently at her.

"I can't marry you-uns. I never kin."

"Why?" he demanded in a measured tone. "How kem ye hev changed yer mind? Ye hev told me often that ye would."

"W-a-al," she drawled, looking away at the skies, her unthinking eyes arrested, too, by the blazing comet, "I *did* 'low wunst I would. But a man with eddication would suit me bes', an' ye hain't got none."

"No more hev ye," he argued warmly. He was clinging for dear life to his vanishing hope of happiness. He did not realize depreciation in his words — only the facts that made them suited to each other. "Ye know ye *would n't* take l'arnin' at school — an' I *could n't* git it; 'pears ter me we air 'bout ekal."

"It air a differ in a 'oman," said Theodosia, quickly. "A 'oman hev got no call to be l'arned like a man."

This very subordinate view failed in this instance of the satisfaction it is wont to give to the masculine mind.

"Waal, ye did n't git enough l'arnin' ter hurt ye," he retorted. Then, relenting, he added, "But I don't find no fault with ye fur that nuther."

The color flared into her face. How she resented his clemency to her ignorance! She still sat in her lowly posture on the step, leaning her bare head against the column of the porch, for her bonnet lay on the floor beside her; but there was a suggestion of self-assertion in her voice.

"I ain't expectin' ter live all my days in the woods, like a deer or suthin' wild. I expec' ter live in town with eddicated folks, ez be looked up ter, an' respected by all, an' kin make money, an' hev a sure-enough house." Her ambitious eyes swept the shadowy gables down the street.

He broke out laughing; his voice was softer; his face relaxed.

"Laws-a-massy! Dosia," he exclaimed, "yer head 's plumb turned by one day's roamin' round town. Ye won't be in sech a hurry ter turn me off whenst we git back ter the mountings."

"I ain't goin' back ter the mountings!" she cried; "I be a-goin' ter marry a town man ez hev got position, an' eddication, an' place." She paused, stung by the fancied incredulity in his eyes. "Why not? Ain't I good-lookin' enough?"

She had risen to her feet; her eyes flashed upon him; her beautiful face wore a look of pride. It might have elicited from another man a protest of its beauty. He stared at her with an expression of alarm that was almost ghastly.

"Other men like me fur my looks, ef ye don't, Justus Hoxon," she said in indignation.

"Ef they jes' likes ye fur yer looks they won't like ye long," Hoxon said severely. "I'll like ye when yer brown head is ez white ez cotton — ez much ez I like ye now — more! — *more*, I'll be bound! O 'Dosia," with a sudden renewal of tenderness, "don't talk this hyar cur'ous way! I dunno what's witched ye. But let's go home ter the mountings, ter yer mother, an' see ef she can't straighten out any tangle yer feelin's hev got inter."

It needed only this — the allusion to her commonplace mother, the recollection of the forlorn little mountain home, the idea of her mother's insistent championship of Justus Hoxon — to bring the avowal so long trembling on her lips.

"I won't! I ain't likin' ye nowadays, Justus Hoxon, nor fur a long time past. I ain't keerin' nothin' 'bout ye."

There was something in her tone that carried conviction.

"Air ye in earnest?" he said, appalled.

"Dead earnest."

He gazed at her in the ever dulling light, that yet was clear enough to show every lineament — even the long black eyelashes that did not droop or quiver above her great blue eyes.

"Then thar's no more to be said." He spoke in a changed voice, calm and clear, and she stared at him in palpable surprise. She had expected an outburst of reproach, of beseechings, of protestation. She had braced herself to meet it, and she felt the reaction. She was hardly capable of coping with seeming indifference. It touched her pride. She missed the tribute of the withheld pleadings. She sought to rouse his jealousy.

"It's another man I like," she said, "better — oh, a heap better — than you-uns."

"That's all right, then."

He wondered to hear the words so glibly enunciated. His lips seemed to him stiff, petrifying. He looked very white about them. She did not heed. She was angered, wounded, perplexed, by his acquiescence, his calmness, his taciturnity.

A wave of anxiety that was half regret went over her. She felt lost in the turmoil of these complex emotions. With that destructive impluse to hurl down, to tear, to strike, that is an element of a sort of blind irritation, she went on tumultuously:

"He is a man ez hev got eddication, an' a place, an' a fine chance an' show in life — it 's — it 's — yer brother Walter."

Her aim was true that time. Her shaft struck in the very core of his heart: but the satisfaction of this knowledge was denied her. He looked very white, it is true, but the pale moonlight was on his face; and he only said in an undertone:

"Walter!"

She laughed aloud, a sort of mockery of glee. She had expected to enjoy the revelation, and her laughter was an incident of the scene as she had planned it.

"We war a-courtin' consider'ble o' the time whilst ye war off electioneerin'," she said, with the side glance of her old coquetry.

She saw his long shadow on the pavement bend forward and recoil suddenly. She did not look at him.

"An' so ter-night," she went on briskly, — she had truly thought it a very good joke, — "whilst you-uns war a-star-gazing an' sech, Wat an' me jes stepped inter the register's office thar,

an' the Squair married us. We 'lowed ye did n't see nothin' of it through the tellingscope, did ye? So Wat said I must tell ye, ez *he* did n't want ter tell ye."

She could not see his face, the light was dulling so, and he had replaced his wide hat. There was a moment's silence. Then his voice rang out quite strong and cheerful, "Why, then thar 's no more to be said."

He stood motionless an instant longer. Then suddenly he turned with a wave of his hand that was like a gesture of farewell, and she marked how swiftly his shadow seemed to slink from before him as he walked away, and passed the corner of the house, and disappeared from view.

She gazed silently after him for a moment. Then, leaning against the column, she burst into a tumult of tears.

Daylight found Justus Hoxon far on the road to the mountains. In the many miles, as he fared along, his thoughts could hardly have been pleasant company. As he sought to discover fault or flaw in himself, search as he might, he could find naught that might palliate the flippant faithlessness of his beloved, or the treachery of his brother. His ambition might have been too worldly a thing, but not a pulse of that most vital emotion beat for himself. He realized

it now — he realized his life in looking back upon this completed episode, as he might have done in the hour of death. He had so expended himself in the service of others that there was naught left for him. He had no gratulation in it, no sense of the virtue of unselfishness, no preception of achievement; it only seemed to him that his was the most flagrant folly that ever left a man in the world, but with no place in it. A sorry object for pride he seemed to himself, but he quivered, and scorched, and writhed in its hot flames. His one object was to take himself out of the sight and sound of Colbury, till he might have counsel within himself, and perfect his scheme of revenge — not upon the woman. Poor Theodosia, with her limitations, could hardly have conceived how she had shattered the ideal to which her image had conformed in his mind, as she had stood on the porch and vaunted her beauty, and her belief in its power, and her pitiful ambitions. The woman was heartily welcome to the lot she had chosen. But the treacherous man, — it was not in Justus Hoxon's scheme of things to receive a blow and return nothing. A "hardy fighter" he was esteemed, albeit his prowess was eclipsed by his more peaceful virtues. This, however, should be returned in kind. He would make no attack to be put in the wrong, arrested, perhaps, after

the Colbury interpretation of assault and battery. But Walter had many a weak point in his armor, glaringly apparent now to the once fond brother.

Only a surly, bitter word he had for greeting to the few neighbors whom he met, and who went their way in the conviction that his brother had lost his election; for none ascribed any emotion of Justus Hoxon's to his own sake.

He reached in the evening the little cabin where the padlock hung on the door, and the heavy, untrodden dust of the drought lay without; and so it was that the old days when "Fambly" had struggled through their humble experiences came back to him with that incomparable sweetness of the irrevocable past. Hardships! How could there be, with fond faith in one another, and in all the world! Poverty — so rich they were in love! Life, after all, is more than meat, and there is no hunger like that of a famished heart. He reviewed that forlorn, anxious, struggling orphanage, transfigured in the subtle glow of regretful, loving memory, as one might gaze into the rich glamours of a promised land. Alas, that our promised land should be so often the land we made haste to leave! As he sat down on the step he saw the ragged cluster of children troop down the road from twenty years agone, almost as if he

actually beheld them, himself at the head. He could still feel their plump palms clinging to his hand at the first suggestion of danger. He had led them a right thorny path, each to a successful goal. And now could he turn against "Fambly"? Should he denounce the treachery of one of the little group that he could see huddling together for warmth on the meagre hearthstone, while outside the snows of a long-vanished winter were a-whirl? Should he pull down the temple on Walter's success — the pride of them all? He remembered how his sisters, with that feminine necessity of hero-worship in their untaught little hearts, had clung about Walter. He remembered too that almost every thought of his own life had been given to this man, who had ruthlessly and secretly robbed him of all that was dear to him, and in such wise as to hold him up to ridicule, a scoffing jest, a very good joke! So Walter considered it, and so doubtless would all Colbury. It would have surprised Walter, but his sometime mentor's cheek burned with shame for him.

No; the claims of "Fambly" were paramount. He gave it precedence, as in the old days he had denied himself when "Fambly" dined at the skillet, and the bone and the broken bit he took for his share. He could not bring discredit upon it. He would not lift his hand against it.

It was the object of a lifelong allegiance, and he only marveled that, since the uses of the loyalty were at an end, the empty life should go on. He gazed mechanically at the padlock as he sat there with his dreary thoughts, remembering with what different heart he had turned the key. Ah, Happiness — to pass out from a door, and knock there never again!

He rose at last, his burden adjusted to his strength. He had never worked for thanks. It hardly mattered to him now how his efforts were requited. And though he encountered treachery at close quarters, — of his own household, — it was not in his heart to be a traitor to "Fambly" and its obvious interests. So he too went out from the door in the footprints of Happiness — likewise to return no more.

Walter Hoxon had not altogether ill-gauged the general proclivity to deem all fair in love or war. He was accounted to have performed something of a feat in the clever outwitting of his unsuspecting rival, and to the minds of the many there was an element of the romantic in this hasty wedding of the damsel of his choice almost under the eyes of the expectant bridegroom. He had added to the prestige of success in politics the lustre of valiance in the lists of love, and he encountered laughing congratula-

tions from his friends and political supporters, which served much to reassure him and to banish a vague and subtle anxiety as to public opinion that had begun to gnaw at his heart. They all seemed to think he had done a very fine thing, and that it was a very good joke, and he was soon most jauntily of their persuasion. He could not know that here and there people were saying to one another, aside, the words he had feared to hear in reproach — that the swain whom he and his lady-love had conspired to dupe was his brother, who had done everything for him — had, as a mere child, encountered and vanquished poverty, had clothed and educated this man and his sisters, had served his every interest with a perfect self-abnegation all his life; that it was his brother who had won his election, being a man of much influence and untaught eloquence, and of great native tact and intelligence; that the secrecy, the conspiracy, and the publicity of the dramatic dénouement, in lieu of an open rivalry, rendered it a case of the most flagrant ingratitude, and argued much unworthiness in the people's choice.

But suddenly a doubt began to prevail as to whether he were the people's choice. In the returns from the farthest districts, not heard from till quite late in the day, in which Walter Hoxon had felt secure, Quigley developed unex-

pected strength. In great perturbation Walter swiftly patrolled the town in search of Justus; unprecedented developments were imminent, and he hardly dared face the emergency without his valiant backer at hand. Justus had disappeared as utterly as if the night had swallowed him up.

"Consarn the tormentin' critter!" exclaimed Walter, mopping his brow as he stood at the little gate of Mrs. Elmer's yard, returning thither, after his fruitless searching, in the hope of finding his brother among the familiar faces. "Mad ez a hornet, I 'll be bound, an' lef' me in the lurch. Beat arter all, I 'll bet!"

Theodosia listened, tremulous, aghast. All the fine prospects that had seemed so near, into whose charming perspectives she might in another moment have stepped as actually as upon that path to the gate, were drawing away, dissolving, as tenuous, as intangible, as those morning sunlit mists shifting and rising from before the massive blue ranges of the Great Smoky Mountains, and dallying with the distances into invisibility.

"I tole ye ag'in an' ag'in ye bes' not be *too sure*," she said, a sob in her throat, with an obvious disposition to wreak her disappointment upon him.

It was crushed in the moment.

He turned a frowning face full upon her. "Hold yer jaw!" he cried violently. "Ef 't war n't for you-uns I 'd hev Justus hyar, an' I 'll be bound *he* could fix it. Ye miserable deceitful critter — settin' two own brothers at loggerheads! I 'll take no word from *you-uns* — sure!"

He shook his head indignantly at her, clapped his hat upon it, and turned desperately away as a man came running up. "Have ye found Justus?" Wat exclaimed.

"Justus? No. But they say it 's a tie — a tie!"

For the news was already bruited throughout the town — in a ferment of excitement, because of the closeness of the contest — that the two candidates, racing gallantly neck and neck, had come under the wire together with not so much as the point of a nose to distinguish the winner.

Walter stood still for a moment, his dark eyes dilated with eagerness and anxiety. Suddenly he leaned back against the gate-post with a deep sigh of relief and relaxation.

"Then it 's all right," he exclaimed breathlessly. "The coroner 's my frien', ef I ain't got another in the worl'. Old Beckett will stan' by me, *sure!*"

As the coroner held the election, the sheriff himself being a candidate, it was his duty to

give the casting vote. This prolongation of the jeopardy of the result heightened the popular interest, the more as the officer did not immediately decide upon his action in the matter.

"I want a leetle time ter think it over — a leetle time fur the casting vote," he said, as he gnawed at a plug of tobacco, then crossed his ponderous legs while he leaned back in a splint-bottomed chair in the register's office.

He was a tall, portly man, with a large, round imperious face, thatched heavily with iron-gray hair. He wore no beard, and was dressed in brown jeans, which imparted a certain sallowness to his dark complexion. He had small gray eyes, at once shrewd and good-natured, but his manner was bluff, imperative, and all the judiciary of the State could hardly have compassed an expression of a greater sense of importance.

He was observed with much interest by a number of men who lounged about the room. A tense sub-current of curiosity underlay the suspense natural to the occasion, for it was well known to the gossips about the court-house that he and the sheriff had not been on the best of terms; when their official functions had happened to bring them into contact they had clashed smartly, and the county rang with their feuds. His course was obvious to all — his hesitation

only an affectation, lest a too vehement animosity be imputed to him.

"Poor Quigley's cake is dough," observed one of the incumbent's friends in an undertone, standing with his hands in his pockets, and gazing through the long dark vista of the hall out of the door into the sunlight's glow, as it fell upon the few houses and the great stretch of arable land beyond. A horizontal shadow of a cloud lay at its extremity, as definite as a material barrier, and far above it rose tiers of green and bronze hills like a moulding to the base of the lapis-lazuli-tinted mountains.

"This never happened in this county before," said the register, glancing up from a big book in which he was copying the doings of "the party of the first part" and "the party of the second part" — the familiar spirits of his den.

"Why, no!" exclaimed the coroner, with a pleased laugh. "To me the castin' vote is ez *phee*-nomenal an' ez astonishin' ez the comet." He chuckled — the fat man's unctuous laugh. "Something like the comet, too: it has its place in the legal firmament, but 't ain't often necessary to use it."

"That war a toler'ble funny tale 'bout the comet they air a-tellin' roun' town," observed a young countryman pausing in front of the two, his hands in his pockets, his hat on the back

of his red head, a wide grin of enjoyment on his freckled face, — "about the feller that hed his sweetheart a-courtin' out hyar in the yard last night, an' tuk ter lookin' at the comet through the spy-glass, an' whilst he war busy a-star-gazin' the comet, another feller stepped up with the Squair, an' married his gal — ha! ha! ha!"

Beckett looked up interested. Incongruously enough a vein of romance ran through the massive strata of conceit, and intolerance, and vainglory, and pertinacity, and pugnacity that made up the very definite structure of his nature. He dearly loved a lover. He was as sentimental as a girl of eighteen, and he melted instantly into suavest amenities at the first intimation of a love-story in abeyance.

"I ain't heard 'bout that," he said in a mellifluous voice. "Ye know I was tucked up in yonder" — he jerked his thumb over his shoulder — "tendin' to the countin' of the votes, bein' returnin'-officer. Who married?"

"Why this hyar Walter Hoxon — him ez is candidate fur sher'ff," said the red-haired interlocutor, widening his grin.

Beckett elevated his heavy, grizzled eyebrows. A sudden, secret, important look, as if he were colloguing with some one vanquished in argument, crossed his face. He nodded once or

twice, but only said acquiescently: "Ah — ha! Ah — ha! Toler'ble enterprisin'. Run fur office an git married 'lection day."

He smiled broadly. Any innovation on the stereotyped methods appealed to him with the grace and relish of a new metre to a neophytic rhymester.

"Wat 's a nice boy, a mighty good boy, too," he went on, with his oily voice quite soft. "Run mighty well in this 'lection, too. He 's a mighty smart, good boy."

He nodded his big head approvingly. "I don't wonder he cut the t'other feller out. Mighty fine feller Wat is."

"Well, now," said the register, suddenly putting his pen behind his ear, and leaving the party of the first part and the party of the second part to their own devices, "I 'm blest if I don't think Justus is worth a hundred of Wat, lock, stock, an' barrel."

Once more the grizzled eyebrows went up toward the iron-gray thatch of the coroner's forehead. "*Justus!* I 'm free ter say I dunno nobody equal ter Justus. I hev known Justus sence he war knee-high ter a pa'tridge — the way he did keer fur them chil'n, an' brung 'em up ter be equal ter anybody in the lan'! An' smart — *smart* ain't the word fur him! Ef he hed education he could do anything; but he

hed ter stan' back an' let the t'other chil'n git it. Whar would Wat be ef 't war n't fur Justus?"

"That 's what makes me say 't was a mighty mean trick he played on Justus," the register broke in.

"Who? How?" demanded the coroner.

"Why, Justus was the t'other feller. Wat an' the girl never let *him* have an inklin' of it. They just fooled him along, believin' she was goin' ter marry *him*. An' las' night when it was reported all over town that Wat was elected, an' Justus took time from electioneerin' fur his brother to breathe, they tolled him out to look at the comet, an' slipped off an' married."

The man of sentiment, with the election in his hand, sat looking loweringly about him. His satisfaction was wilted; his fat hung flabbily on his big bones; his small eyes were hard and cold.

"Waal," he said, rising at last, "these extry an' occasional opportunities like comets an' castin' votes oughter be took full advantage of — full advantage of; no doubt about that."

And thus it was that the casting vote tipped the scale in favor of the incumbent.

"He 's ez hard-headed, an' *ty*rannical, an' *per*verse, an' cantankerous a critter ez ever lived, with no feelin's, nor softness, nor perlite-

ness in him — but he 's a square man. He 'll do the *fair* thing — every time," the coroner said in explanation.

And so he braced himself for another term of official wrangling.

Poor Theodosia! She never forgot that return home, through all the dust of the drought and the glare of the midsummer sun. Even to herself her nature seemed too small for the magnitude of the various anguish which she was called upon to endure. The sharp alternations of certainty and doubt which she had undergone seemed slight, seemed naught, in comparison with the desolate finality of despair, the fang of hopeless regret, and the dread of the veiled future with which she had made no covenant of expectation or preparation, that preyed upon every plodding step as she went. Her anxiety as to the wisdom of her course was not assuaged by the aghast dismay of her mother's face, when she reached the little house overlooking the encircling mountains, — as still, as meditative, as majestically unmoved, as if no more troublous world existed, — and unfolded the story of her visit to Colbury. She felt for the first time in her life how Justus Hoxon's friend merited his confidence. Her mother had no reproaches, no sarcasms, no outbursts of

grief. She addressed herself to the support and the comforting of her daughter, but with so evident a hopelessness and an expectation of bitter things to come that the girl burst out sobbing afresh.

"D' ye think Wat air so wuthless ez all that!"

The discipline of life began for her here. As the price of his political defeat, Walter had scant relish for the triumph he had scored in love. He was surly, taciturn, or else loud with reproaches and criminations, which grew more vehement and contumelious if she answered, seeking to exculpate or justify herself; and if she were silent, her submission seemed to exasperate him and to develop a crafty ingenuity in finding fault. He brooded grimly on his brother's probable exultation when he should return and hear the news of the casting vote. To fortify himself for the encounter he spent much time at the still, and his drunken, reasonless wrath was even more formidable to the object of his displeasure than his sober, surly resentment against her as the cause of all his disasters. But Justus did not come. Walter began to doubt if the news of the untoward result of the election, in which he had spent all his energies, had reached him. He also began to desire, contradictorily enough, that his brother should know it. For although Justus

must needs recognize it as a mortal blow to his dearest foe, it had the capacity of doing much execution in its recoil. Justus had had the election so greatly at heart; he had struggled, and planned, and managed with such preternatural activity and tact and energy from the first, that it would smite him hard to know that it was all in vain. And then his vicarious ambitions, his pride, his pleasure, in the elevation of "Fambly"! Walter cast about futilely for an assurance that he might have the satisfaction of reducing all this. He knew that Justus, in his mistaken certainty of the result of the election, would not ask for information, and that he could not read the newspapers. A letter — even if there were any remote presumption as to his address — would lie indefinitely in the mail, and find its way at last to the Dead Letter Office.

Walter realized after a time that Justus intended to return no more — the woman he loved was his brother's wife. Justus had probably put the breadth of the State between them, Walter sneeringly concluded.

He made haste to quarrel with his wife's mother, in his perverse relish of aught that might give Theodosia pain, and they quitted her home and took up their residence in the house in which Theodosia had once expected to

live, the scene of the early struggles of "Fambly."

Theodosia's beauty could hardly be said to fade; it disappeared in the overblowing. She grew very fat and unwieldy as the years wore on; her face broadened, her florid complexion degenerated into a mottled red and purple. She was no prettier than her mother had been when she ridiculed her lover's eulogy of her mother's spiritual beauty. She had a hard life with her drunken, idle, slothful husband, who habitually imputed to her agency every evil that had ever befallen him, holding it to excuse him from all exertion to better their very poor estate, and whose affection had been easily kindled by her beauty and as easily extinguished.

Justus, self-exiled from the mountains, tramped the valley roads, hardly caring whither, and drifted finally to the outskirts of one of the large manufacturing towns of Tennessee. He worked for some seasons doggedly, drudgingly, on a farm near by, but found a sort of entertainment in the sights and sounds within the city limits, as having no association with the past which his memory dreaded. He prospered in some sort, for although he was ignorant of all methods of skilled labor, fidelity is an art with so few proficients that friends and opportunities

were not lacking. His progress was somewhat hampered, however, despite his evident intelligence, by a doubt which prevailed concerning his mental balance. He was often observed to stand and gaze smilingly, fondly, after any group of ragged, dirty children; he, although of the poorest, was profuse in gratuities to any callow beggar who did not know enough of the world's ways to expect nothing of such as he, as did the older ones. He could not read, but he bought newspapers from the smallest of the guild of newsboys, and meditatively turned the sheets in his hand, and then softly and slowly tore them to bits. And these things created a doubt of his sanity, for who could know how "Fambly" looked at him from the pinched face of every poor, and cold, and hungry child?

At last, despite this unsuspected drawback, a congenial occupation came to him. He was night watchman at a great factory, and as he paced, all solitary, back and forth in the yard, he was wont to note the stars as the infallible seasons brought them into place; and he began to remember their names, and to trace the strange configuration of the constellations, and to con again the stories woven into their shining meshes which he heard at the time that the great comet blazed among them.

And this is his never failing interest — dark

summer nights, when the Galaxy opens a broad avenue of constellated light across the heavens, seeming a veritable road, as if it might be the way to God's throne, beaten hard and bright by the feet of saints and martyrs; or when the moon is full, and autumnal glamours reign, and only the faint sidereal outlines prevail; or when winter winds are high, and the snow lies on slanting roofs, and spires gleam with icicles, and Orion draws his scintillating blade; or when, all bedight in scarlet, "Arcturus and his sons" are guided into the vernal sky.

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